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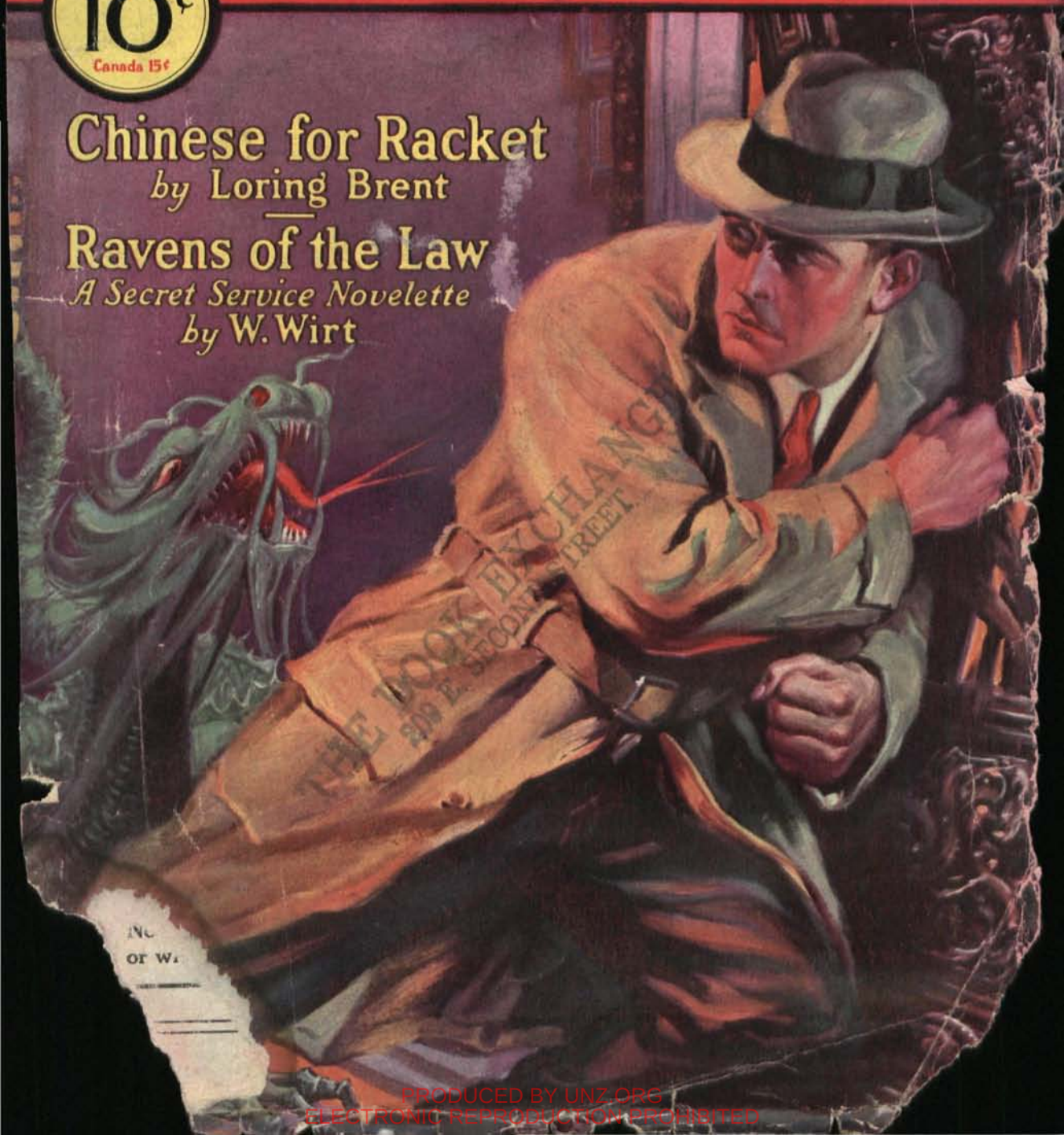

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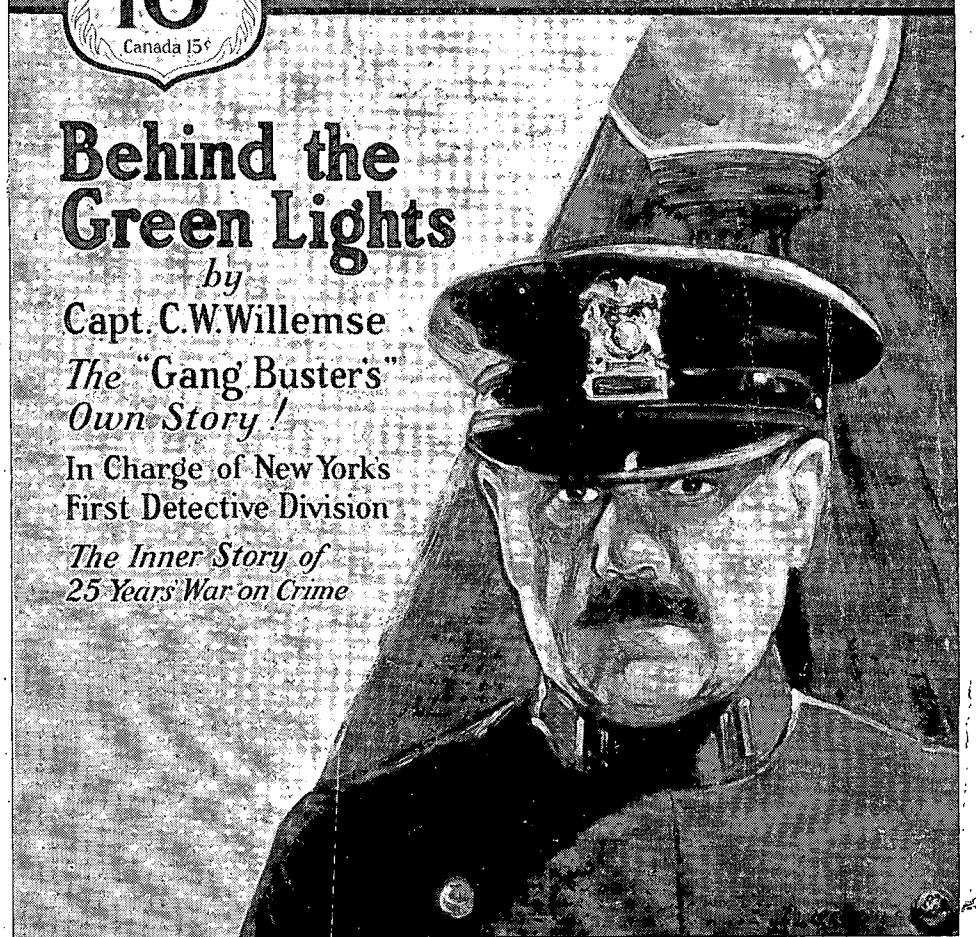

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ARGOSY

ON SALE EVERY WEDNESDAY

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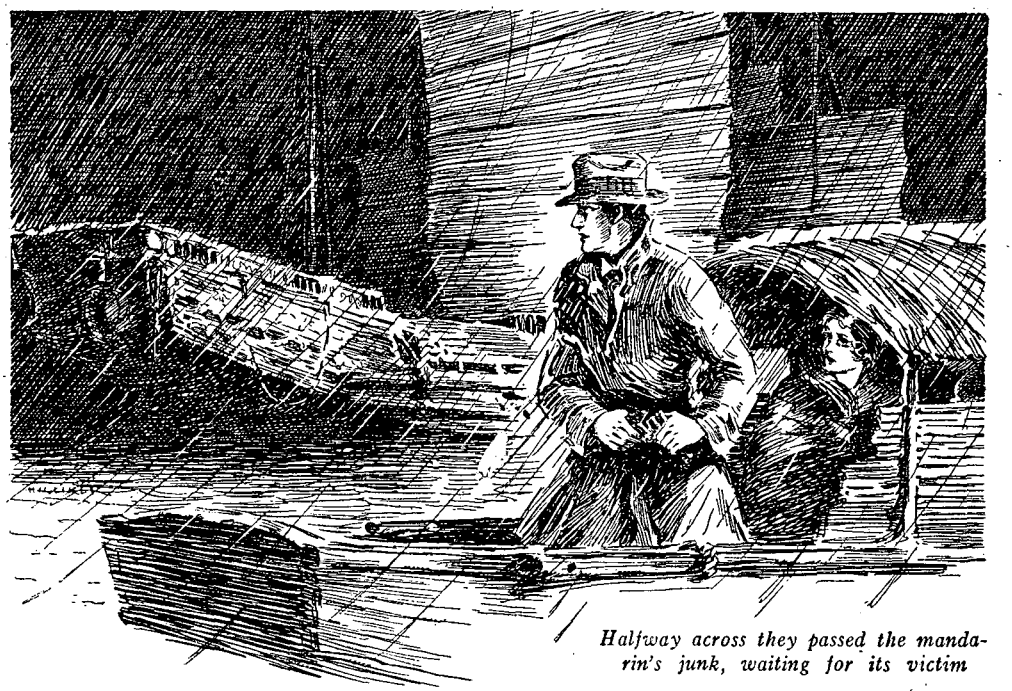

Halfway across they passed the mandarin's junk, waiting for its victim

Chinese for Racket

Ordered to leave China as a trouble-maker, at the moment his business mission reaches a crisis, Peter the Brazen suspects "ways that are dark and tricks that are vain"—tricks that involve his too adventurous friend Susan O'Gilvie

By LORING BRENT

Author of "Vampire," "The Hand of Ung," etc.

CHAPTER I.

AN OFFICIAL ENEMY.

FOR probably the last time in his life, Peter Moore was watching the sun go down in China. The American consul to Hongkong had just informed him that he was to leave China immediately and to stay out of China indefinitely.

The American consul was a worried-looking man with iron-gray hair and a white spike mustache. He sat stiffly upright in his chair on the other

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side of the table for two which Peter Moore had reserved for a farewell party in the rooftop restaurant of the Oriental Hotel. Peter's dinner guest hadn't yet arrived. And he hoped that she wouldn't arrive until Amos Brangdon had taken his departure.

"I can't have you deported," the consul was saying, "because you are not, technically, a criminal, and you are not guilty of any actual criminal offense."

"Thank you," Peter said dryly.

"But you are a trouble-maker."

"I am supposed to be a radio research engineer," Peter said, lighting a cigarette and squinting at him over the end of it. "I came to China almost two months ago, as the accredited representative of the General Electric Company, of Schenectady, New York, to track down the rumor that a bright young Chinese scientist had perfected in his Hongkong laboratories a device for eliminating static from radio."

"You should have come directly to me!" Mr. Brangdon snapped.

"I don't see why," Peter differed. "I chose to conduct the investigation on a lone-wolf basis."

The American consul laughed hollowly and without mirth. "And what have you accomplished, Mr. Moore? You have interfered repeatedly in the affairs of influential Chinese. I don't mind telling you that powerful interests have requested your immediate departure. It has been brought to my attention that last night you boarded a yacht owned by a native prince of Tonkin—the Sultan of Sakala—and, in a quixotic attempt at rescuing a young American girl on board, enlisted the services of the entire Asiatic squadron. What was the result?"

"The girl got off safely," Peter answered.

"Rubbish! The yacht was boarded. American naval officers found that you had wounded the Sultan—and offended him beyond measure. I will tell you, briefly, what the result was. The Sultan of Sakala is so indignant that he has canceled orders for American power machinery and other kinds of merchandise worth in excess of a half million gold—and given his trade to Germans, Japanese, and English!"

Peter Moore puffed at his cigarette and said nothing. Mr. Brangdon went on:

"Mr. Moore, I have a complete record of what you have been doing in China recently. We won't discuss your previous visits. This is not the first time you have been told to keep out of China. But let's just consider your present visit.

"On the way over you all but caused a mutiny on the Queen of Asia. In Shanghai you precipitated a riot in Native City. Leaving Shanghai, you involved yourself with opium smugglers and pirates—another mutiny. In Hai-Phang, a few weeks ago, you incited a religious uprising among the Ungese, and the country is still very unsettled throughout northern Cambodia. Yet you say you came to China to investigate a static eliminator invented by a Hongkong scientist!"

"Shall I give you my report?" Peter asked quietly.

"Not yet. I am not through. Isn't it true, Mr. Moore, that the real cause, the precipitating cause, of all of these troubles I have enumerated has been, in each case, a young American woman, a Miss Susan O'Gilvie, whom you have, on each occasion, attempted to keep out or get out of mischief?"

"I know a Miss O'Gilvie," Peter said noncommittally.

"Isn't she in Hongkong now?"

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"I believe she is."

"Isn't she the young lady who caused all that trouble last night? You needn't answer, Mr. Moore. I know the facts. I have made a thorough investigation. Will you tell me what you have to say for yourself?"

PETER wished that the American consul would go away. It was his last chance to see a sunset in China, and he wanted to enjoy it. From where Peter sat, close to the parapet, he could see straight across the misty blue of the harbor to Hongbom Bay. His eyes wandered restlessly among the shipping clustered between North Point and Sulphur Channel: sampans and junks, brown and gold in the growing dusk; rusty-sided little tramp freighters flying among them all the flags of the world; majestic liners which were little more than floating apartment houses adroitly equipped with just about everything that was modern and luxurious.

He watched the shadow cast by the peak creep across the harbor and deepen from cornflower-blue to sapphire-blue. The streets below him were dark, tortuous channels in which rickshas and sedan chairs coursed like schools of lazy fish.

A warm puff of breeze carried to his nostrils a mingling of odors: spice and sandalwood incense and oriental cooking smells. And from some rooftop near by there floated to him the soft twanging of a Chinese lute.

He recognized the tune and could have sung the words in the original Chinese. It was Li Po's "Ode to the Moon." By looking up and over his right shoulder he could see the moon, a pale slice of silver sailing in the powder-blue of the late afternoon sky above Taitam Gap.

Peter said to the consul: "Dr. Fong Toy, the inventor of the static eliminator, has proved as elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp. When I reached Hongkong a month ago, I was told he had gone to Indo-China—Hai-Phang, to be specific—to search for a particular kind of gum arabic to use in his experiments. When I reached Hai-Phang he was gone. Back to Hongkong! I have been here two weeks, trying to see him. So have the representatives of other large electrical corporations—British, German, and Japanese. This device, if it works, will mark the greatest advance in radio engineering since De Forest invented the audion bulb. It is certainly up to you, Mr. Brangdon, as the official representative of the United States in Hongkong, to help me put this matter of business over, not to hamper me."

"You have not asked me for my help," the consul said angrily. "I would have been delighted to help. My only reason for not ordering you to leave China sooner is that I wanted America to have this great invention. But you have had time enough to negotiate with the inventor. That is my opinion and that is the opinion of the State Department. You must leave China immediately."

Peter looked at him shrewdly. A corner of his mouth twitched. Then, as if he were deep in thought, his eyes focused dreamily on a liner which lay at her mooring down in the harbor. She was the Mongolia: hull so black that it might have been carved from ebony, upper works of snowy white, twin stacks of buff. Her decks would be swarming with tourists, débutantes, club women, business men, tired of sightseeing, fretful for home—ham and eggs, whole wheat cakes, and Main Street.

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The Mongolia was clearing for San Francisco at noon to-morrow.

AT tables all about them heads were turning and men were looking up. A girl was coming toward Peter, and at first he did not recognize her. She was lovely in a slim dinner gown of silver net over shining coral silk which gave her a radiance and shimmer all her own. Her sandals were jade-green with diamond-crusted high French heels. They tapped crisply as she came toward the parapet.

Peter knew those heels. She had once admitted indifferently that they were diamonds, not brilliants. Susan O'Gilvie would, of course, wear diamond heels. Why not? She was worth more than ten million dollars, and could afford, if she wished, to throw diamond heels away after wearing them once.

Recognizing her, Peter crushed out his cigarette in an ash tray and stood up. Susan gave him a bright glance from eyes which were not blue but a deep violet, then she looked questioningly at the solemn man across from Peter.

Peter introduced them.

"Miss O'Gilvie, this is Mr. Brangdon, the American consul to Hongkong."

Susan exclaimed: "How thrilling! Shall we all have a cocktail?"

Her voice was of fine quality, like good metal struck upon sharply; clear and rather sweet and, like the rest of her, curiously suggestive of romance.

Mr. Brangdon did not smile. He acknowledged the introduction with a nod. When Susan was seated he said:

"I have just been talking with Mr. Moore about some of his recent adventures in which, I believe, you figured."

"Weren't you," Susan brightly inquired, "simply spellbound?"

Mr. Brangdon remained standing, and it was now evident that he had no intention of smiling.

"Your recent escapades," he said stiffly, "have caused the consular service and the State Department of your country a great deal of embarrassment, Miss O'Gilvie. You may have the opinion that the Far East is nothing but a large playground for thrill-hunting, wealthy American girls—but you are greatly mistaken."

Susan had stopped smiling. She lifted her chin a little. The American consul went on:

"I had just told Mr. Moore, when you came, that he must leave China immediately."

"How soon," Peter drawled, "is immediately?"

"Within twenty-four hours."

"Regardless of whether I have wound up my affairs here?"

"Those are my orders. There are three ships leaving Hongkong to-morrow in the late forenoon. I don't care which ship you select."

"But—" Susan began.

"Never mind," Peter stopped her.

Mr. Brangdon addressed himself now to Susan.

"And these same orders," he said, "apply to you, Miss O'Gilvie. You must be out of China within twenty-four hours."

Susan's eyes blazed. Her face was rosy with indignation. Susan was not accustomed to being told what to do. She was as generous as the sun—and as willful as any princess. She flashed an angry, inquiring glance at Peter. To her immense surprise, the lid of his left eye vaguely flickered. It was not a crude wink. It was the merest ghost of a shadow of a wink.

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Susan managed a wistful little smile. With resolute chin high, she said:

"Very well, Mr. Brangdon."

It implied that she understood him perfectly—and that he was dismissed.

"No tricks," said Mr. Brangdon sternly. "I am prepared to be exceedingly unpleasant to you two if you disobey my orders. Good evening."

He bowed and withdrew.

Susan fixed round and indignant eyes on Peter.

"HE hasn't any right to order us out of China!" she flared.

"Look down there," Peter said, indicating the harbor.

"It's beautiful," Susan agreed. "But—"

"See that big black ship with the buff funnels?"

"Yes, Peter."

"See that big white ship with the blue funnels?"

Susan nodded.

"The black one is the Mongolia. The white one is the City of Singapore. The Mongolia sails for the United States to-morrow at noon, via Shanghai, Yokohama, and Honolulu. The white one sails at the same time for Java, via Saigon, Bangkok, and Singapore."

Susan was watching him with parted lips.

Peter removed from an inner pocket a leather billfold the color of seasoned mahogany. He opened it and took out a long printed green slip of paper.

"This is my ticket on the Mongolia," he said.

Susan opened a platinum and sapphire bag. From it she removed a long printed pink slip of paper.

"This is my ticket on the City of Singapore," she said. "Oh, Peter, I know we're both leaving China to-morrow—you for America, I for Java. But that isn't the point. He hadn't any right to talk to me that way, as if I were six years old and had just been caught swiping jam in the pantry. Why were you winking at me?"

Peter smiled. "Did you notice the American consul's eyes?"

"I always notice men's eyes."

"Color?"

"Blue. Why?"

"Did you ever hear of the strange influence the Far East has on white men?"

"Of course! What are you driving at?"

"When I met Mr. Brangdon in the American consulate in Tokyo six years ago his eyes were brown!"

Susan looked at him in puzzlement. Then, "Peter," she drawled, "you wouldn't kid a poor innocent orphan, would you?"

"Couldn't," Peter answered. "Figure it out for yourself."

Her eyes brightened, then crinkled at the corners and narrowed.

"He's a fake!" she cried suddenly. "He isn't the American consul at all! But what's the big idea?"

"Racket," Peter said.

"What kind of racket?"

"Chinese kind of racket."

CHAPTER II.

GRAFT.

SUSAN nervously lighted a cigarette and said to a hovering waiter:

"We want something to drink. What do you want, Peter?"

"Dry Martini."

"Bring us a couple of dry Mar-

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tinis." Susan's creamy complexion was now pink with excitement. The thrill hunter was on a nice hot new scent. "Let's have some details."

"I don't know what it's all about," Peter confessed. "There is an old and vulgar Chinese saying to the effect that the odor of a dead rat may be more pungent than that of a dead whale and, yet be imperceptible to a man's nostrils. I have been trying all day long to make a definite appointment to-night with Fong Toy. For some mysterious reason, he is very evasive."

"I don't see that," Susan interrupted. "You know very well that Hongkong is cluttered with the representatives of other big corporations, all of whom would give their eye teeth to own the patent rights to the static eliminator. Little as I know about radio, I realize what an important invention Fong Toy has. He is simply stalling—playing you off against the others. It's nothing but good business psychology. If he can make you anxious enough, you will offer him more than you intended."

"Does that explain the imitation American consul?"

"Why not? He's part of the picture. If Fong Toy wanted you to become anxious, what better way could he have found? You've got to do business with him inside of twenty-four hours."

Peter was slowly shaking his head. "It isn't as simple as all that. It's a racket, but I smell that rat in another direction. Since breakfast I've been aware that I've been shadowed. It's all very mysterious and suspicious."

"Did you see Fong Toy at all today?" Susan asked.

"No. But I spent hours with Wan Sang, his secretary. He will come here—any time now—to let me know definitely whether or not I can see Fong Toy to-night. Fong Toy works and does business only at night. In the daytime he sleeps. I think he is playing poker—trying to bluff. Wan Sang told me that if I want to show Fong Toy I am really in earnest, I will bring a hundred and fifty thousand dollars with me to-night."

"Mex or gold?"

"Gold."

"Check or cash?"

"Cash."

"What did you say?"

"I said I'd bring it."

"Will you?" she demanded.

"I parked thirty ten-thousand-dollar notes on the Bank of Hongkong—$300,000 Mex or $150,000 in gold—with the manager of this hotel before I came up here."

"Why wouldn't Fong Toy be satisfied with a cashier's check?"

"He's evidently a strange, old-fashioned young Chinese. I've done business with his type before. I know how he feels."

"It sounds phony to me," Susan said. "I think you're right about that rat."

"Nevertheless," Peter answered, "when I sail on the Mongolia to-morrow, the rights to that static eliminator are going to sail with me. Now, if you'll excuse me a moment, I'll do some telephoning and check up on Mr. Brangdon."

Susan, watching him go, had a sense of impending drama. She was sorrier than she would admit that Peter was sailing in one direction to-morrow and she was sailing in another. She was afraid that Siam, French Indo-China, Malaya, and Java would be devoid of thrills without Peter's magical presence.

She was conscious that a number

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of men were staring at her. Susan was accustomed to that. Idly she stared back. A young Eurasian with paper-white skin and hair as smooth, as black as patent leather, eyed her over the top of a green drink. His eyes were those of a playful python. He fascinated Susan, he reminded her so much of a reptile. As her gaze lengthened, he put his glass down, gave her a silky smile, and started to rise. Susan gave him a look which would have frozen a tropical sunset.

PETER returned, seated himself, and said with a smile:

"The American consul left for Canton this afternoon on the four o'clock boat, to be gone several days."

"Then you won't have to sail tomorrow if you don't want to. Shall we wait another week, Peter?"

"No," he answered firmly. "I was sent out here to do a job—and return."

"With the bacon."

"I'll bring the bacon," Peter said, rather grimly.

Susan laughed. "You look as if you are going to burst into tears."

"Why not?" he answered. "The Chinese have a saying, 'You can hardly make a friend in a year, but you can lose one in an hour.'"

"They have another saying," Susan said: "'He who falls in love has come to the end of happiness.'"

"The Analects say, 'When the ear will not listen, the heart escapes sorrow.'"

Susan laughed. "Li Po said, 'Never trust a woman, even if she has borne you seven sons.' I'm afraid you don't trust me."

"I don't," Peter said.

"You think I'd try to induce you to go to Siam and Malaya with me."

"You know I'd like to go."

"Then come on! Throw up your silly old job, marry me, and we'll have a grand time. I'll give you a big allowance."

"Every time I think of marrying you, I think of your ten million—and my feet get cold all over!"

"Thank God," said Susan, "we are not in love."

"Yes," he agreed, "thank God for that."

"If we were in love, I think I'd just naturally break down and die tomorrow when your ship goes north and mine goes south."

"It's going to be bad enough," Peter admitted.

"It's going to be terrible," Susan said. "It makes me want to scream. I keep hearing the trade wind in the palm trees, the whisper of waves on golden beaches, the trumpeting of elephants in teak yards, and the silver wind-bells tinkling in the big temples. And I keep seeing the little desert islands in the Malay Archipelago—Wouldn't it be fun to be shipwrecked on one?

"Peter, you're the grandest pal a girl ever had. I'll promise not to get into jams or start trouble if you'll only come along. I'll be so good you won't know me. Think of Java and Singapore! Think of the tropical moon, the palms, the golden pagodas, the lazy blue southern oceans. Think of seeing, hearing and smelling all of those things—with me!"

Peter looked at her murkily.

"Listen, kid," he said, "if you don't cut that out, papa'll spank."

WITH a sigh Susan said: "Perhaps we'd better have another drink. Tell me about this racket. Do you want to know my theory? My theory is that that imitation consul

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was hired to play his part by one of your powerful competitors, maybe a German. You know how thorough the Germans are."

"No," Peter said. "It's a Chinese racket. The man who had posted our imitation consul must have been Chinese. He knew too much. He knew everything. And the stunt itself was typically oriental."

"But what was the object?"

"I don't know yet."

"What Chinese would want you out of China in twenty-four hours?"

Peter shook his head. "What I want to know is—what's his next move?"

Susan looked at him anxiously and asked, "A knife in the back?"

"The night is young," Peter answered.

The night was, in fact, just newly born. The sapphire-blue of the harbor had vanished before a purple invasion, and this, in turn, had given way to clear blackness through which the lights on ships and the shore lights of Hongbom Bay sparkled like diamonds. Chinese lanterns, electrically lighted, cast a soft romantic glow over the rooftop restaurant, and swayed gently in the warm spiced breeze.

Susan saw a plump Chinese of about forty threading his way among the tables toward them. He wore a suit of tropical white drill, pince-nez glasses behind which shoebutton eyes twinkled merrily, and a pink necktie in which was set a flake of kingfisher jade.

He looked jolly and simple-natured, but Susan, glancing at Peter, saw that his jaw line had hardened.

Peter introduced the Chinese to Susan as Mr. Wan Sang.

"Wan Sang," he added, "is Dr. Fong Toy's secretary. Will you sit down, Wan Sang?"

Susan sensed behind the politeness of his words, and behind Wan Sang's smooth Chinese courtesy, a mutual hostility.

Wan Sang seated himself and beamed at Susan through his thick lenses. He said, in English almost painfully precise:

"Mr. Moore and I are very old friends. We became acquainted five or six years ago, here in Hongkong, when I was *compradore* to Hing Sing Tai Pan, on Ice House Lane."

Susan, resting her chin on her small pink palms, asked Wan Sang what a *compradore* did.

"It is a position requiring the utmost honesty," he answered. "A *compradore* does all of his employer's hiring and firing, and, in some cases, handles practically all of his employer's money. When it is necessary to deal with the natives the *compradore* attends to it. Hing Sing Tai Pan is Chinese for Hannibal and Company, an export and import company. But I find working with Dr. Fong Toy much more interesting. I find science fascinating. And Dr. Fong Toy is a great man with a wonderful mind, although he is only twenty-six years old. He is the greatest scientific genius in China, if not in the entire world."

"I'm taking your word for that," Peter said dryly.

WAN SANG laughed.

"All geniuses are eccentric," he said. "Dr. Fong Toy finds that his brain is more active at night than in the daytime. He works all night and sleeps all day. And he dislikes business dealings of any sort. His mind soars above business—dollars."

"That," Peter said with a wry smile, "is why he insists that I bring a hundred and fifty thousand gold as

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an earnest of my good faith. How that young man hates money!"

Wan Sang laughed again, politely. "You do Dr. Fong Toy an injustice. I am the one who insisted that you bring the—shall we say, token of your company's good faith? What is a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to the General Electric Company—one of the richest corporations in the world?"

"What time," Peter asked, "is my appointment with Dr. Fong Toy?"

Wan Sang's smile vanished. "Mr. Moore, I have just left Dr. Fong Toy, and I am very much afraid that he cannot see you to-night."

"Why not?"

"He is in the midst of some new experiments. How he hates all these business details! He would so much rather dream and work with his coils and tubes and condensers."

"Have you told him that my company is prepared to offer him one million dollars gold and a handsome royalty for the use of his invention?"

"I have, indeed, and he was highly flattered and honored."

"Then where's the hitch?"

"It is simply that his mind soars above material considerations."

Susan saw the flicker of fire in Peter's eyes, and wondered what was going on beneath the surface of this polite conversation. But he smiled and said:

"Wan Sang, supposing you and I stop beating about the bush. Wasn't it Confucius who said, 'The arrow is on the string, and it must go'? Let's stop playing poker. I have been in China almost two months trying to put up a very generous business proposition to Dr. Fong Toy. Each time when I am about to corner him, he slips away. You know me. You know my company. You know that G. E. will give him better protection and better terms than he can secure from any of our competitors. I am tired of chasing him. Important work is waiting for me in America. When can I see Dr. Fong Toy?"

Wan Sang lifted his shoulders eloquently. "If I only knew!" he breathed. "I suppose you have the hundred and fifty thousand dollars, gold with which to bind a contract?"

"I have."

"In currency?"

"In notes on the Bank of Hongkong."

"What a pity!" Wan Sang sighed.

Peter leaned toward him and said rapidly: "Wan Sang, wanchee talkee squeeze? How much *cumshaw* wanchee?"

The Chinese, blinking at him, reminded Susan of a frog. What Peter had asked him, in pidgin, was just how much graft he wanted.

"Ten thousand dollars," Wan Sang answered clearly.

"Can do!" Peter said crisply. "I'll pay you ten thousand dollars on completion of my deal with Dr. Fong Toy—and not a dime before. Is that satisfactory?"

Wan Sang arose from the table with the alacrity of a bouncing rubber ball. Susan thought he was insulted by Peter's bluntness, but he said, "Will one o'clock in the morning be suitable?"

"One hour past midnight to-night?"

"Yes, Mr. Moore. I will see to it," Wan Sang said determinedly, "that Dr. Fong Toy drops his work and places himself—"

"And the static eliminator—"

"—And the static eliminator, at your disposal. Perhaps I should warn you that a representative of a large German electrical concern has an appoint-

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ment with the doctor at two o'clock, and the British and Japanese representatives at three and four o'clock, respectively."

"No one will talk to Dr. Fong Toy before I do?"

"No one! Should I mention that a four-horse chariot cannot overtake the spoken word—not to mention the signed contract?"

Peter smiled and answered: "If two men are of the same mind, their sharpness can divide metal. I'll be there at one. Thank you."

Wan Sang bowed ceremoniously. "It is a distinction to be of service—Ren Beh Tung!"

WHEN he was gone, Susan asked Peter what Ren Beh Tung meant.

Peter laughed and answered, "Man of Bronze."

"Brass?" Susan suggested. "Meaning nerve—brazen?" When Peter shrugged she asked, "Is it the custom here to name men after metals?"

"Just an old Chinese custom."

"They ought to call you the Chromium Kid," Susan murmured. "They tell me chromium is very hard and tough, and that it yields to practically nothing. All right, Peter the Brazen—what's the lowdown on Wan Sang? Did that ten thousand dollars graft solve the riddle? Was it racket money?"

"Not at all. It was an everyday Chinese business transaction. When a Chinese enables you to complete a business deal, he expects his squeeze. He looks upon his squeeze as money honestly earned. 'You allatime help my; my allatime help you.' There was never any doubt in Wan Sang's mind that I would pay him his squeeze at the proper time."

"Then what's the racket? Why the imitation American consul? Why, by the way, am I to be banished from China within twenty-four hours? Just where do I figure in the racket?"

Peter shook his head. "I can't answer any of those questions. There may be more than one racket in operation. This is evidently the night when Fong Toy's static eliminator is going to be sold to somebody. My hunch, as a research engineer in a small way myself, is that he has been having the usual trouble perfecting his device. After years of trying, he has finally solved his last problem. It is now a case of who is to get it. This is a big night. I am sure that some very mysterious and exciting things will occur before one o'clock."

CHAPTER III.

AN ENVOY OF TROUBLE.

A WAITER had come to the table. Peter said, "Let's order our dinner. I'm starved."

"Are you Mr. Peter Moore?" the waiter asked.

"Yes."

Susan looked behind him and saw a very tall, lank man of about thirty with the gaunt, pallid look of one recently ill. The whites of his eyes were yellowish. His hand, taking a cigarette from his bloodless lips, visibly shook.

The waiter said: "A man is asking for you. He says you do not know him, but that it is very important. His name is Sanderson. He is waiting by the elevators."

The man stepped from behind the waiter and placed his two hands on the edge of the table and stared down at Peter. Susan saw that his fingernails were pale-blue and that his suit of

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white duck, while freshly laundered, was almost threadbare; that it was frayed at the cuffs and that his white shirt, which was likewise fresh, was also frayed at the cuffs and collarband.

"I was afraid you might not come out," he said in a voice that sounded weak and nervous. "My name is Jim Sanderson, Mr. Moore. I know it's very presumptuous of me to come butting in here like this. I wouldn't have done it if it had not been almost a matter of life and death. I have been very ill. Malaria and some nameless jungle fever. I was discharged from the hospital only this morning."

Susan's quick mind jumped to an obvious conclusion: this was nothing but a touch.

Jim Sanderson was clutching handfuls of the tablecloth, in his nervous eagerness.

"I came to you, Mr. Moore, because I'm certain you're the only man in Hongkong who can help me out. My sister is a prisoner in a dump in Kowloon, and if I can't somehow get her out of there by ten o'clock to-night, they're going to sell her up-country!"

Susan gasped: "You'd better sit down, Mr. Sanderson." But the tall, lanky man remained standing and looking at Peter as if he had not heard her.

Peter was gazing up at him, but he said nothing. And Sanderson went on: "I know you think it's mighty strange of me to bother you like this. In the first place, I'm not certain that she *is* my sister. That's the maddening part of it."

When he hesitated, Susan said clearly, "Sit down, Mr. Sanderson. Tell us about it."

Sanderson looked at Peter, and Peter nodded. "Sit down," he said.

The invalid pulled out the chair and seated himself. He apologized again. "I hate to intrude, but there was no time to lose. I'm absolutely desperate, Mr. Moore. This girl who may be my sister Ellen is in this awful Chink dump over there in Kowloon—the Jade Dragon. I heard definitely this afternoon that she was to be sold to-night into marriage to a mandarin from Hengchowfu. His junk is in the harbor now, all decorated up. Po Tung, who runs the Jade Dragon, is selling this girl to the mandarin for twenty-five hundred Haikwan taels."

Susan asked breathlessly how much a tael was.

"Somewhere around a dollar," Peter answered. And said to Sanderson: "Mr. Sanderson, I don't see why you've come to me. What's the matter with the American consul?"

"I've been to the American consulate," Sanderson panted. "He left for up-river this afternoon, to be gone a week. Besides, it's not a consular matter. They'd say, 'Show us absolute proof that this girl is your sister.' Then, even if I could—which I can't—the whole thing would be bogged down indefinitely in red tape. I came to you because I know your reputation. You know the Chinese, and you're resourceful and absolutely fearless."

Peter asked him bluntly if he wanted to borrow twenty-five hundred Haikwan taels.

"No, no, no!" Sanderson said emphatically.

LOOKING at Peter, Susan saw his look of skepticism slowly go away.

"Let me tell you the whole thing," Sanderson begged. "Then you'll understand why I'm so desperate. Six years ago, when my sister was just twelve, she ran away from home. We

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lived in San Francisco. Ellen was simply crazy about Chinatown. Every chance she had, she went down there and prowled. Even when she was a little thing, she insisted that it was her dream to go to China. She was a dreamy, romantic kid. She learned to speak Cantonese from an old cook we had. When she was eleven, she could speak Cantonese as well as a native.

"Our mother thought it was risky for her to prowl around alone in Chinatown. She was afraid Ellen would be kidnaped and held for ransom, because my father was a pretty rich man then. And when Ellen vanished that night, we were all pretty certain that that was what had happened—she had gone down there, as usual, and some one had grabbed her.

"We waited for some kind of notice. My father would have raised a quarter of a million to get her back—was prepared to raise it. But no demand for a ransom ever came. We advertised. We spent a fortune on private detectives. I spent six months hanging around Chinatown, trying to pick up clews. But there wasn't a trace of her. She had simply vanished.

"In that time, my father's health went to pieces. He neglected his business. At the end of six months, he died of a complete nervous and physical breakdown. And when the estate was settled, there was barely enough income for my mother to exist on. She abandoned all hope that Ellen was being held for ransom, and we both accepted the theory that Ellen had run away to go to China and would eventually let us know about it. I was sure that she had come down here to southern China, because Hongkong and Canton had always interested her most.

"When my father died, I made up my mind to come out here and look for her. That was nearly six years ago. My mother and I still believe that she ran away, then became ashamed of what she had done and was afraid to let us know where she was. That is still my belief. Recently, my mother's health has been failing. She has been living all this time with an aunt of mine who has a ranch near San Fernando. She thinks Ellen has fallen into the clutches of some unscrupulous Chinese—and it now seems that her worst fears are correct.

"I have been following one lead after another for these past five and a half years. I've been as far north as Kalgan, and as far south as Amboyna. I've followed false trails over Indo-China and Malaya and even to Borneo. It was in Indo-China that I came down with malaria and whatever this jungle fever is. It nearly killed me. Then, in Pnom-Penh I heard, from an old Chinese woman, of a white girl who had come to Amoy five or six years ago from San Francisco. I had heard the story before. Sometimes it was Shanghai. Sometimes it was Foochow. Each time I lost the trail.

"I was too sick to travel, but I traveled, anyway. Six weeks ago I landed in Hongkong. I took a coastwise steamer up to Amoy. The Chinese women in Pnom-Penh had given me the name of an old chop maker. I looked him up. He said he had heard the story but had never seen the girl. He thought she was in Kowloon.

"By that time I was running such a temperature that I was afraid I'd never get back to Hongkong. But I did. And I collapsed on the dock when I came ashore. Somebody put me into a rickscha and took me to the hospital. I was delirious for a solid week. The only thing that pulled me through was the absolute necessity of following the new

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trail to Kowloon. A necessity like that will pull a man through anything. I shouldn't have left the hospital this morning, but I did. And I'm glad I did. If I'd waited until to-morrow, it would have been too late."

EXCITEDLY Susan asked, "Did you go to Kowloon, Mr. Sanderson?"

He had been looking at Peter while he talked. Now, for the first time, he noticed Susan. His sick, yellowed eyes regarded her. He slowly nodded.

"Yes. I've spent the entire afternoon there. And I'm certain that I'm at last on the right trail."

"Did you see your sister?"

Sanderson shook his head. "No. They wouldn't let me see her. She's a dancing girl there. They call her Plum Blossom. The dancing girls live in a sort of dormitory affair behind the Jade Dragon. They're guarded like trained animals."

"Are they all Chinese?"

"Yes. I made inquiries. There is an Englishman named Chumley in Kowloon who exports camphor and ginger. He goes to the Jade Dragon every night. He told me one of the girls is called Plum Blossom, and that she is white. Certainly, she answers to my sister's description. She has blue eyes, dark hair and a very clear, white complexion."

Peter asked if his sister had any distinguishing marks—birthmarks.

Sanderson shook his head.

"Did you go to the police and ask for aid?"

"Yes. But they would give me no help. They said, if I was certain this girl is my sister, they would bring pressure on Po Tung, the proprietor, to let me talk to her. But Po Tung is powerful—one of the richest men in this part of China. What proof could I give the police?"

Susan sympathetically shook her head and Sanderson went on:

"These dancing girls are so many slaves. When rich mandarins from upcountry want to buy a girl, they go to the Jade Dragon and look over Po Tung's assortment."

"Why," Susan indignantly demanded, "don't the British do something about it?"

"Kowloon," Sanderson wearily answered, "is China, not England." He shrugged and said, "I may be wrong. This girl may not be Ellen. Chumley was the one who told me about this mandarin—Yen Chan—who is going to buy the girl they call Plum Blossom. What can I do?" he exclaimed. "Can I go there to-night and declare that this girl is my sister?"

"You'd get a knife in the back," Susan said.

Sanderson said with a hopeless sigh, "I don't know what to do. Even if I were to ask this girl point-blank if she is my sister, she might declare that she is not. She might be too ashamed to admit it. Oh, I know what you are thinking. You are thinking: 'That girl is a bad egg. She has gone the way of all "Melican gals" who come out and go Chinese.' You are saying to yourselves, 'What possible good can come of saving such a girl from the life she has, perhaps, chosen to lead?' That is not the point. If that girl is my sister, she must return to California with me. It's our mother, not she or myself, that counts now. I'd drag her out of the worst dump on the China coast, no matter how low she's sunk!"

Sanderson suddenly clutched the edge of the table. His eyes rolled queerly.

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Susan cried, "Peter! He's going to faint!"

Their waiter was hovering near. "Bring some brandy—quick!" Susan ordered.

Sanderson sent her a grateful glance. "Thanks," he said. "This whole thing has upset me terribly."

Susan looked quickly at Peter. "What are we going to do about this?"

And Sanderson put in: "Mr. Moore, please believe me. I would not have dreamed of trying to drag you into this if I had not been desperate. I haven't any strength. I didn't know any one else to turn to. I had to have the help of some one who is capable, who knows how to deal with the Chinese. I had heard about you—of your genius at getting people out of scrapes. Isn't this the young lady you rescued last night from the yacht of a Tonkin Sultan?"

"Where did you hear about that?" Peter asked.

"It's all over Hongkong. I heard you were at this hotel. When I realized I could not carry on single-handed any longer, I came to you. Please don't think I'm yellow or a quitter. If I weren't so damned weak, I wouldn't need help."

The waiter returned and placed a drink of brandy beside him. He gulped it down; turned to Susan and said:

"YOU American girls have no idea what the life of these dancing girls is like. They have less standing, less of a chance to get a square deal, than a Negro had in the days of slavery. Girls have no standing in China, anyway. Have you heard of the baby towers, where newborn girl babies are dropped into a deep well from a tower—dropped alive into stinking pits? That's characteristic of China's attitude toward women. They aren't wanted. Do you want to hear more?"

"Yes, I certainly do!" Susan said emphatically.

"Men like Po Tung take Chinese girls when they are from ten to twelve years old and have them trained. Women who are experts teach these girls all the arts of lure. They teach them to dance, to sing and to play musical instruments. They make twentieth-century Delilahs of them.

"When these girls are from sixteen to eighteen years old—or salable, or marriageable—they become dancers in places like the Jade Dragon.

"When a wealthy Chinese wants to buy or marry a girl, he visits a place like the Jade Dragon. He sees numbers of these girls dance, sing and so on. He makes his selection. But he does not buy her then. He may come back a half dozen times. The last time, he is entertained at dinner in a private room.

"The girl acts as a hostess to him. He learns then whether or not she is well trained and a good hostess. If the dinner goes off properly—to his satisfaction—he buys her and takes her away.

"Chumley told me that that is what is going to happen to-night. Yen Chan, the mandarin from Hengchowfu, is to be served dinner to-night by this girl they call Plum Blossom. If she is satisfactory, Yen Chan will pay Po Tung twenty-five hundred Haikwan taels for her and carry her off in his junk. If he discovers that she is not a virgin, he can return her and demand his money back—and any court in China will uphold him! That's the law in this benighted land.

"It is a hideous system, and when I think that that girl may be my sister, it

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makes me want to murder somebody. Mr. Moore, will you help me?"

Susan looked at Peter with sudden determination. If he wouldn't help this pathetic man, she would. She glanced at her diamond and platinum wrist watch. It was almost eight o'clock—and the girl who might prove to be Sanderson's sister would be taken away from the Jade Dragon at ten or earlier.

"Peter, you'll help him, won't you?"

Peter did not seem to hear. His eyes were vague; his thoughts seemed miles away.

"I was hoping," Sanderson anxiously went on, "that you would go over there with me. It isn't that I'm scared. What's my life, anyhow? But I haven't the strength of a half-drowned cat. One punch—and I'd be through. Besides, I cannot talk Cantonese. You can. You could talk to Po Tung. I'm sure you could demand and obtain a talk with this girl. And I'm positive it would not take the two of us long to find out whether or not she's my sister. One glance may be sufficient for me."

"A girl changes more in appearance from twelve to eighteen," Susan pointed out, "than during any other six years of her life."

"I know that, Miss—"

"O'Gilvie," Susan helped him. Her generous heart had gone out to this pathetic man.

He was nodding eagerly. "Yes, Miss O'Gilvie; but one glance should tell us whether she is white or yellow. Won't you come, Mr. Moore? I don't see why it should be in the least dangerous."

"I'm not thinking of the danger," Peter answered, and hesitated. He was sorry for Sanderson, too; but he was wondering about his appointment with Fong Toy.

AS if she had read his thoughts, Susan exclaimed, "Peter, it's just eight o'clock! You'll have plenty of time to go to the Jade Dragon with Mr. Sanderson and be back in time for your appointment with Fong Toy!"

"It takes a full hour by sampan," Peter said, "to cross the harbor to Kowloon. The last ferry ran a half hour ago."

"But we can make it. And it won't be dangerous."

Peter smiled. "Any time a white man undertakes to interfere in the private affairs of the Chinese, there's a possibility of trouble. I'm tired of riding tigers."

"But, Peter, think of that girl's poor mother!"

"I'm thinking of her."

"Then why won't you go? If you think it will be dangerous, take a revolver along."

"My pistol was stolen out of my trunk last night. Besides—"

"I'm pretty well heeled, Mr. Moore," Sanderson eagerly put in. "I have two guns right here with me—one on each hip. One for you and one for me!"

Susan said impatiently, "Peter, how can you hesitate? Do you know what I think? I think that poor girl has been kept prisoner from the time they kidnaped her in San Francisco. She hasn't been permitted to communicate with anybody! You know how such things happen! Supposing I was being held prisoner in an awful place like that—and was going to be sold tonight to some Chinese man! You'd tear Kowloon apart with your hands, trying to save me, wouldn't you?"

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"This is entirely different."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you why, frankly—with all due apologies to Mr. Sanderson."

"Don't you think he's telling the truth?"

"I don't question him. But, frankly, this is such an old, old story."

Sanderson said stiffly, "I don't think I quite get you, Mr. Moore."

"I'll explain. Whether you know it or not, China is knee-deep in men who are looking for lost or stolen sisters, wives, sweethearts. Like yourself, these poor devils waste their lives and their fortunes following one wild goose after another. Each clew they find, they're sure is the right one. And when they trail it down—they find nothing. Doesn't it occur to you, Sanderson, that your sister may be dead—that she may not have left San Francisco alive?"

"What you mean," Susan said, "is that you're simply scared to death you'll miss your appointment with Fong Toy. I should think you'd rather lose a thousand static eliminators than let one unfortunate girl be sold to some horrible old mandarin."

SANDERSON said evenly: "Mr. Moore, I could have lied to you. I could have said I was positive this girl in Kowloon is my sister—and I'm sure you wouldn't have hesitated. But I'm not sure. And it's the uncertainty that is maddening. If I were too late in trying to help her, I could never forgive myself."

"Look here," Peter said sharply. "Give me one piece of proof that this girl is what you think she is. I don't mean that she is your sister; I mean that she is white, not yellow."

"I've already given it," Sanderson answered huskily. "I've mentioned that the price Yen Chan is to pay for her is twenty-five hundred Haikwan taels. That is the current price for white girls. The current price for Chinese girls is one thousand taels."

"There!" Susan cried triumphantly, but Peter still hesitated. She said wildly, "If you don't go, I'm going. I mean it."

"I won't let you go," Peter said.

"I must go," Susan said. "Three are better than two—and a woman might fool two men whereas she couldn't fool another woman. I'm pretty smart, if I must say it myself. Peter, I'm through arguing. I'll help this man find his sister if it takes every dollar I possess!"

She sprang up. "Are you coming?" she cried.

Peter arose with a sigh. "All right," he said wearily. "But it's going to rain. You'll ruin that gown and those slippers."

"I don't care."

As they left the table, Peter observed that several men simultaneously got up from near-by tables—a young Mongolian with a Chicago gunman's haircut; a German with a limp; a Jap with a cherry-lacquer box under one arm; and a Eurasian with eyes as bright and cold as a cobra's.

He was sorry for Sanderson and Sanderson's mother; but he had wanted this last evening alone with Susan. He knew that, after to-morrow, he would probably never see her again. He had wanted to stay here; to eat, drink and dance until it was time to collect his thirty ten-thousand-dollar notes from the hotel manager and go down for that momentous appointment with Fong Toy.

Kowloon and the Jade Dragon spelled trouble. It promised to be an even more eventful evening than he

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had anticipated. And Peter wished he knew just what the fates were brewing for him.

CHAPTER IV.

ORIENTAL NIGHT.

WHEN they left the hotel, Susan wore a cape over her silver and coral dinner gown, and Peter had on a trench coat over his dinner jacket. His weather prophecy was fulfilled before they reached the sampan jetty. A wind sprang up. A sprinkling of raindrops came on one of the first gusts. Then the wind died down and rain commenced to fall in a steady drizzle.

Peter selected a sampan with a thatched roof which looked more water-tight than the others, and ordered Susan and Sanderson to sit inside, out of the rain. He himself took a position in the stern, facing aft. He was merely curious to see if they would be followed.

He knew that he had been trailed all day long by the Mongolian with the Chicago gunman's haircut, and the Jap with the cherry-lacquer box, and he wondered, as he saw several sampans slipping along astern, just what the German, the Mongolian, the Jap and the Eurasian intended to do.

Sanderson gave him a nickel-plated revolver and Peter, after breaking it to make sure that it was loaded, slipped it into his hip pocket. Its pressure and weight were comforting. He hoped there would be no need for a gun, but he was sure that he had been bullied into an errand which could lead nowhere but into trouble.

Halfway across the harbor, they passed a junk which was gayly festooned with paper flowers, now drab and limp in the rain. Odors of spice and sandalwood incense drifted from it in an invisible smudge. Some one aboard was picking mournful notes from a Chinese guitar.

This was, Sanderson said, Yen Chan's junk.

Kowloon was, when they reached the other side, a sea of mud. They took rickshas to the Jade Dragon. Susan was thrilling to the excitement of the adventure, but Peter felt uneasy. He didn't want trouble. And the least trouble might readily make him too late for that appointment with Fong Toy—an appointment which he had traveled fifteen thousand miles to keep, and for which he had impatiently waited almost two months. Now that it was made, any delay in keeping it would mean that the static eliminator would go to the Germans, the Japanese or the British. If he had been the serious-minded young business man that he swore he wanted to be, Peter would never have left Hongkong to-night on an errand as fraught with menacing possibilities as was this.

AS he saw the lights of the Jade Dragon through the slanting rain ahead, he asked himself if he were really cut out to be a business man. Sometimes he was afraid he was a hopeless failure.

Peter had never been inside the Jade Dragon, but he was sufficiently familiar with its reputation to know what it would be like. Among men of the sea, it was as notorious as the infamous Number Nine of Yokohama, a spectacular part of the *yoshiwara* which was destroyed by the earthquake.

Chinese music came quivering out of the sprawling black building. It covered an area of at least a square block, additions having been added to

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additions until it was impossible to say what the original nucleus had been.

Teak doors blackened by age but still stoutly upheld by their massive wrought-iron strap-hinges swung outward like the jaws of some prehistoric monster to engulf them, and they were admitted to an atmosphere of smells, sounds and sights which characterize oriental pleasure resorts: the reek of stale booze, stale cigar, candle and opium smoke; the sustained harsh rattling of voices using a score of tongues, the blare of China's contribution to whoopee music, the clatter of chopsticks on porcelain, the clash of cymbals; the bright silks and satins of oriental women, the familiar blue that is Chinese blue and no other color in the world; all seen, heard and smelled through a fog of smoke so dense that, one felt, it could almost be pushed aside with the hand.

The Jade Dragon made no bows to Western jazz joints as did some of the entertainment halls of Shanghai, Hongkong and Singapore. In them, the East met the West, in decorations, music, food and drink. In the Jade Dragon, China went on as it had been going on for five thousand years—raucous, untamed, unspoiled.

That was Susan's word for it—unspoiled. She liked places unspoiled by the modernizing influence of Europe and America. Here, there was no attempt at cleanliness or catering to Western standards or appetites. If you didn't like the Jade Dragon, you could go elsewhere for your whoopee.

Susan inspected the smoky, gloomy interior with bright, excited eyes. This was China! The walls, whatever their original color may have been, were black with age—a purple-black which only centuries of various kinds of smoke could achieve.

Solemn elderly Chinese men sat openly before tables eight inches from the floor, rolled their pills and smoked opium. At other tables, white men gone Chinese did the same thing. At still other tables, sailors — French, American, British, Australian, Italian —sat drinking sour rice wine or *samshu* or trade gin, or fondling native women they had brought along.

A beautiful, sloe-eyed Eurasian girl whose hair streamed about her face in a thick black cloud glanced up insolently at Susan and stuck out her tongue—a sharp darting little tongue, like the tongue of a serpent.

Susan laughed and exclaimed, "Peter, this is real! This is great!"

But he did not hear her. You had to shriek to be heard. To the clamor of voices was now added the cacophony of the orchestra, playing an encore.

Peter stood beside a thick teak pillar and lazily let his eyes wander about. Automatically, he was acquainting himself with the geography of the Jade Dragon, noting exits, sizing up the crowd.

He came to the conclusion that it wasn't a very good place to wear diamond heels.

Sanderson kept close to his side, and Susan kept close to his other side. Whatever happened now, both seemed to realize, was up to Peter.

He halted a waiter and spoke to him sharply in Cantonese. The waiter jabbered back at him in the same tongue and gesticulated toward the far end of the enormous low room.

"Come on," Peter said, and grasped Susan by the elbow.

As they picked their way along a zigzag aisle, formed by tables almost touching, she peered into booths and glanced eagerly from side to side. The large room opened off at intervals into

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smaller rooms, alcoves, dim and smoky in candlelight.

They came to the end of the main room and entered a corridor. At the end of the corridor was a heavy slab of wood painted green—a door.

Peter pushed it open, and they entered a smaller room similar in atmosphere to the large one, but with curtained stalls along the sides. The reek of opium became more pronounced.

ON to the next room. Each room seemed hotter and thicker with smoke than the one before. This one was similar to the last one. Next was a bar, although it bore slight resemblance to any bar Susan had ever seen. One wall was solid with bottles on narrow shelves—bottles of all shapes and colors, but mostly native wines, gins and whiskies from Japan, Java and Malaya. Their colors fascinated Susan. They ranged from palest pink to deepest purple.

A black plank a yard wide and mounted a foot from the floor separated the shelves of bottles from the rest of the room. A tall coolie, horribly scarred, was in charge here.

When Susan, fascinated in her discovery that the tall, scarred man had no ears, stopped and stared, Peter squeezed her elbow and said, "Keep moving, kid."

The next room was, quite obviously, their objective. To the density of tobacco, candle and opium smoke was added the almost sickening flavor of perfume. Along one side of the room a stage ran. It was shallow, as all Chinese stages are, and it had no proscenium arch. There were no backdrops or flats—nothing but a scene painted on the wall: a cherry orchard in blossom. It looked Japanese to Susan. The stage was empty.

Peter led her down the room toward an empty table. She, Peter and Sanderson were, she saw, the only whites in the room. All the others were richly dressed Chinese, and only a few of these wore the clothing of Western civilization. They wore heavy silk and satin robes and little round caps in which beads were set. As far as Susan knew, they might all have been mandarins of remote provinces, *tuchuns, tycoons.*

They gazed at Susan, as one man, with bright, appraising little eyes. Susan did not know that they were not only prospective husbands—and husbands wishing to add to their present store of concubines—but woman dealers; traders come here to look over Po Tung's crop of young and supposedly innocent slaves.

But Susan suspected as much before she had reached the table toward which Peter guided her. She was excited and appalled at the thought.

She said breathlessly, "Peter, they're looking me over, sizing me up, estimating my value. Aren't they?"

Busily sizing up that room from his own point of view, Peter answered with a slight lift of one shoulder.

"Peter, I want you to sit next to me—close to me."

"I intend to. And if the question should arise, you're my wife. Keep that in mind."

Susan didn't mention that she had had it in mind, on and off, for the past two months, since the night she met him.

SHE had never been so thrilled. Her eyes were fever-bright, and there were pink spots on her cheek bones.

"Peter, how long has this sort of thing been going on?"

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"What sort of thing?"—absently.

"Selling girls like so much merchandise."

"Five thousand years."

"Don't kid me."

"I'm not kidding you. Are you horrified or disgusted?"

"Both. It's shameful."

"The Chinese don't think so. American and European women are shocked and disgusted, but Chinese women aren't. There's always been an oversupply of women in the Orient. What's to become of them all?"

"Peter! Are you arguing for this terrible system?"

"Not at all. I'm merely stating facts. Am I right, Sanderson?"

"Absolutely right, Mr. Moore." Squatting on a cushion across the low table, he had been staring curiously at Susan. Peter's question seemed to startle him a little. He added to his answer: "Chinese women don't mind being concubines. It's better than starving. Chinese wives and concubines are well protected."

"Where are the girls?"

"They'll be along presently," Peter replied.

"Do they all bring about the same—a thousand Haikwan taels?"

"No, Miss O'Gilvie," Sanderson answered the question. "It depends on their age and their looks. The younger and prettier they are, the more they bring. But they must be—innocent."

"How much would I be worth?"

Peter looked around at her angrily. "Don't ask questions like that."

"But I'm serious. I want to know."

Peter's mouth twitched slightly at one corner and a gleam came into his eyes as he looked at Susan's bright, eager face. She was sitting cross-legged on a cushion beside him. He ran his eyes shrewdly down to one slim silken ankle which was visible; paused a moment on one glittering diamond heel.

"Oh—thirty cents," he said.

Susan snorted.

"Five thousand taels," Sanderson said.

Something in his voice caused Peter to look at him sharply, but Sanderson was smiling, too. Susan said anxiously, "No more fooling, please. Would I bring five thousand taels, Haikwan?"

"At least," Sanderson answered. Susan observed that his eyes were glassy, as if with excitement, and that hectic spots burned on his cheek bones.

She turned to Peter and cried, "You see? My value to you is just nuisance value. Other men know how desirable I am. I must be worth almost my weight in gold—to the right man."

"In diamonds!" Sanderson said suddenly.

Peter had been reflecting that those diamond heels might get them all into hot water before the evening ended. He looked quickly at the invalid and asked, "What diamonds?"

"Any diamonds—so long as they are first water and flawless."

Peter decided that he didn't like the way Sanderson had been looking at Susan's ankle.

The door by which they had entered opened again. A man came in, and, by an optical illusion, it looked as if he had come in on a puff of smoke. Peter stiffened a little as he recognized the newcomer as the Eurasian with cobra eyes who had been following him most of the day. The Eurasian sat down three tables away, and elaborately ignored Peter, Susan and Sanderson.

Peter wondered if the painted-paper window above him led onto a street or alley. Unless unforeseen trouble start-

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ed, Susan was safe. But he wished he hadn't given in. Susan was a thrill hunter. She loved trouble and met it nine-tenths of the way. This situation could readily turn into dynamite, and Susan could be counted on to supply the necessary spark to set off any known explosive.

This wasn't how Peter had wanted to spend his last evening in China, with his hand ready to leap to a gun.

A SMALL door at the end of the room opened, and a half dozen men filed in with musical instruments, fiddles and Chinese guitars. They proceeded to a large grass mat to the left of the stage and promptly began to play.

There was a stirring of expectancy about the room. Susan, glancing at Sanderson, saw that his face had gone paper-white, that his lips were parted, and that his eyes were glittering pin-points of sharply-focused attention.

They were focused on the little arched doorway which took the place of wings on the right hand side of the stage.

Susan felt her heart begin to thump rapidly. The back of her throat itched, as it always did when she grew excited.

An elderly Chinese man who might have been the last of the Mings, so elegant was his attire, appeared from nowhere and took his stand below the stage, facing the crowded room. His robes were of heavy royal-blue satin heavily embroidered with bright-colored silks and trimmed with gold. A mandarin mustache drooped down about his mouth and gave him a sardonic look.

"Po Tung," Peter said.

"Will they bid for them?" Susan asked.

"No. The Chinese don't do business that way."

Susan was a little disappointed. She was sorry for any girl who was sold into slavery, even if the institution did have the grace of five thousand years behind it; but she wished, as long as they were being sold, that it would be done openly. Seeing girls put on the auction block would be a scene she would never forget.

Susan needn't have worried. She would never forget the scene as long as she lived.

CHAPTER V.

PLUM BLOSSOM.

SUSAN'S first glimpse of the little Chinese slaves was, in itself, brilliant and unforgetable.

From the arched doorway, they came sedately onto the stage, walking primly, yet with a certain charm and grace. They were like so many bright flowers. All wore jackets and trousers and gay little slippers.

Susan had seen Chinese silks on display in bazaars—the brightest, gayest colors she had ever seen. Now, she saw these colors again—bright greens, blues, pinks, reds, lavenders, until the shallow stage was a giddy explosion of all colors known to artful Chinese dyers.

Small girls and tall ones; slim ones and stout ones. They were restrained, demure, prim; yet there was about them an air of unsuppressible excitement, of expectancy. There were veiled smiles and smiles hastily concealed. And the impression grew on Susan that these girls were not unhappy in their bondage, but were looking upon their sale to unknown men as escape.

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So heavily were they powdered and rouged and mascaraed that they all looked, except for their various sizes, as if they had been carefully patterned after the same Chinese doll.

They walked out onto the stage and strolled about; pirouetted and strolled again, gliding about, never colliding, never touching. It was not a dance, because there was no rhythm to it; but it was the most beautiful and barbaric spectacle Susan had so far seen.

They seemed to move about the stage according to a routine — glide, pirouette, stroll — glide, pirouette, stroll. The orchestra squawked. It wasn't music; it was awful din, and it was as oriental as the Taj Mahal. It got into one's head. It seemed to beat its way into the body through the very pores.

The music suddenly stopped and the girls stood still, frozen in the attitude they had struck when the last note sounded. It was a beautiful tableau.

MEN all about the room were rising to their feet. Peter got up and said, "You wait here, Sanderson."

He was the first man to reach Po Tung. Susan watched his rapidly moving lips, his quick, decisive gestures. The proprietor of the Jade Dragon was staring at him, plucking at one end of his mustache. He smiled. He replied, no doubt, in Cantonese, and turned to the stage. Susan heard him jabber a brief sentence. It reminded her of firecrackers.

One of the girls became animate and stepped down from the stage. Peter spoke to her and she shook her head. He spoke again, and she nodded. He looked over at Sanderson and lifted his eyebrows. Susan glanced at Sanderson and was surprised to discover that he wasn't looking at the girl who might prove to be his sister, but at her, with eyes that seemed to swim. Then he jumped up.

"Sit down," Susan said sharply.

He acted like a man suddenly wakened from deep sleep. He took a staggering step, whirled about and sat down so heavily that the floor shook.

"I don't know whether I can live through this," he said. "If it isn't Ellen, I don't want to live any longer."

The girl with Peter had bright, inquisitive eyes. For Susan, one glance was enough. This girl, with her Chinese doll mask, was white, not yellow.

"She's white," Susan said excitedly to herself, "or I'm a full-blooded Senegambian!"

Her eyes had dabs of green in the outer corners. Her eyebrows had been shaved underneath at the outer ends, and these ends inclined upward and fixed with cold cream or grease paint, so that she would have an oriental cast of countenance.

Her jacket was lime-green, her trousers a delicate pastel magenta. She wore small dark-red slippers embroidered with blue, yellow and gold. Her feet, certainly, had not been bound when she was an infant, as some of the other girls' had. They were small, but shapely and normal.

The bright inquisitive eyes rested for a moment on Susan's, then danced on and rested for a longer time on the white, drawn face of Jim Sanderson.

"This young lady," Peter introduced her, "is Plum Blossom. She speaks no English—nothing but Cantonese."

Plum Blossom asked a question in singsong. Peter, with a hard smile, interpreted it.

"Susan, she asks if you're for sale."

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"Tell her," Susan answered recklessly, "I am—to the highest bidder!"

Peter translated the answer to Plum Blossom. The girl laughed. It was a silvery, tinkling laugh; then she spoke again.

"She says," Peter told Susan, "that she would bring a higher price in the open market than you would. She says her price is twenty-five hundred Haikwan taels, which puts her at the top of the heap. Now, I'll ask her some questions."

Plum Blossom sat down beside Sanderson; looked at him and quickly averted her face.

PETER began to question her rapidly. The process was retarded because of the fact that it was necessary to translate each question and answer for Sanderson's benefit.

"What is your province?"

"Canton."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"How long have you been in Kowloon?"

"A few moons—maybe three, maybe six. I forget. Time passes."

"Will you remove your make-up?"

"No—no!"

"Tell her," Sanderson said grimly, "she must. Tell her we absolutely insist."

"It is very important that you remove your make-up!" Peter told the girl.

"Why?"

"Perhaps you have blemishes. Perhaps you are trying to conceal hideous birthmarks."

"No. My skin is as clear as a flower!"

"A flower is not afraid of the light."

"But it took hours. It took hours and hours." Plum Blossom, it was evident, was on the verge of hysteria.

Peter saw that Po Tung was staring hard at him. This was getting into ticklish territory, perhaps into tabus.

"Make her take that make-up off!" Sanderson panted.

Peter said to the girl: "You must remove your make-up. We must see your skin."

"You are only curious. You don't want to buy me."

"We have asked to see your face."

"Never!"

"Shall I call Po Tung?"

That settled it. Peter provided a large silk handkerchief, Sanderson another; and Susan gave the girl her gold-backed mirror.

Hesitantly, the girl removed the make-up. From time to time she glanced at Sanderson. She seemed terrified. And the feeling grew on Susan that Miss Plum Blossom was no one in the world but Ellen Sanderson. It was the most dramatic moment Susan had ever experienced. To witness the reunion of a brother and sister separated by six tragic years! It was wonderful and beautiful—and terrible!

Breathlessly, Susan watched the girl's natural complexion appear from under the heavy coating of powder and paint.

It was white—as white as Susan's own complexion!

"The eyebrows," Peter said firmly; and Po Tung moved toward the group.

Most reluctantly, the girl removed the paste from the eyebrows. Peter took the handkerchief and straightened the brows. Eyes, moist with tears, reproached him. A rosebud mouth quivered. It was amazing. A young and beautiful white girl had emerged from that mask! Unquestionably white!

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.

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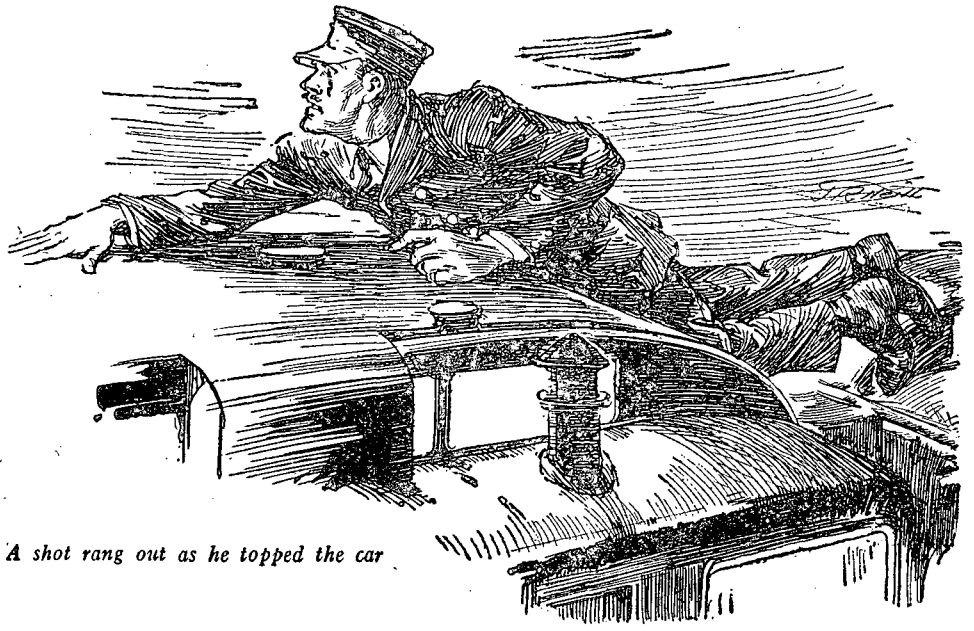

A shot rang out as he topped the car

Train Trap

When the Flying Virginian jolted to an unexpected stop, brakeman Tom Bledsoe didn't wait for aid from Providence—he did the one thing he could, bullets or no bullets

By A. LESLIE

BANG! Crash! Rattlety-bump-bump!

Tom Bledsoe rubbed his bruised head and swore with wholehearted fervor. What the blankety-blank-blank was the matter with Ad Cardigan, anyhow? Of all the ways to stop a crack passenger train! And why stop ten miles this side of Huntington? Something must be wrong.

Still growling to himself, the big brakeman picked up his lanterns and fusees and stepped out onto the observation platform. It was a starlit night, but dark. Tom opened the left-hand gate and swung down the steps. Then he tumbled back onto the platform in a sprawled heap. Something had struck the steel side of the coach scant inches above his head and screamed away into the night.

The crackling report still ringing in his ears, Bledsoe picked himself up and leaned cautiously over the right-hand gate. Immediately another bullet yelled past and he ducked for shelter.

But in that hurried glance he had sized up the situation. The fusee which had been responsible for Ad Cardigan's jolting stop still smoked and sputtered a couple of car-lengths ahead of the engine, and in its red flare Bledsoe had caught a glimpse of the masked man who took a pot shot at him. He had

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seen also the flare of light from the open mail car door. Nothing less than a holdup of the C. & P.'s crack passenger train was in progress. The big brakeman swore luridly and glanced apprehensively to the rear.

His anxiety on that score was somewhat relieved, however, for less than a coach-length distant loomed the tall tower and red eye of an automatic block signal. No danger of a rear-end smash.

Along the length of the train Bledsoe could hear the cries of alarmed passengers who had been aroused by the rough stop and the crackle of shots.

Bledsoe turned to enter the car and paused. A wild idea of slipping over the rear gate and going for help raced through his brain, and was instantly rejected. For more than a mile the high, unclimbable walls of a deep rock-faced cut fenced in the right of way.

No, that was out. The tall brakeman thought furiously. Then suddenly he uttered a sharp exclamation.

IN that single hurried glance cast toward the front end his brain had automatically registered something which, because of his familiarity with this stretch of track, had made no conscious impression at the time. That something was a darker blotch of shadow stretching across the cut above the standing train and not three car-lengths distant. The engine and mail car stood just beyond the end of the cut, and that long shadow up there was an overhead grade crossing.

The bandits must use that road to get back to Huntington, or to Radford in the other direction, and if Bledsoe could manage to reach a telephone in time a warm reception might be prepared for them at either place. But how to reach a telephone?

A plan forming in the back of his mind, the brakeman glanced upward, then shook his head; to clamber up over the end of the smooth, curving roof was impossible and he dare not attempt the side of the car. Abruptly he jerked open the door and strode into the coach.

"Stay in your berths and don't be frightened," he answered the questions hurled at him as he passed through the car. "They are after the mail. They won't bother with passengers.

"Bring your stool and come into the vestibule with me," he ordered the terrified Pullman porter. "That's it, put it right over the bumper."

He mounted the stool and began slashing at the tough fabric of the vestibule curtains, which joined the two Pullmans, with his heavy knife. Swiftly he made an opening in the top through which, with a prodigious amount of effort, he managed to squeeze his body. For an instant he lay crouched atop the vestibule and listened; then, with the utmost caution, he crept up the curved end of the coach until he lay prone on the flat roof.

Just as he topped the roof of the car ahead a shot rang out and his heart gave a sickening bound. He would be a perfect target outlined against the sky. But as no bullet struck near him and the shot was not repeated, he came to the conclusion that it had been fired to discourage curiosity on the part of the passengers. Drawing a deep breath, he crawled on.

Now he was directly beneath the crossing and in the deeper shadow. Until he attempted to clamber over the railing he would be safe, but any undue noise while making the effort would probably result in a fusillade.

He set his teeth and rose up in the shadow. His fingers could not reach

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the edge of the bridge, and he was forced to risk the deadly menace of noise and jump for it. One hand barely caught a hold and for a terrible moment he swung with slipping grip; but by a mighty effort he muscled himself up, caught with his other hand and then managed to reach the railing. An instant later he was crouched in the roadway, breathing hard, but safe.

ON hands and knees he crawled to where the road dipped sharply as it left the bridge. Once over the lip, he rose to his feet and started running; but he hadn't taken more than a dozen steps before he halted abruptly and stood listening. On the air trembled a soft hum, low and monotonous. Tom crept cautiously around a bend and stopped again. Just ahead of where he crouched was a big automobile, a long, low car with speed showing in its every line. Its lights were dimmed and its engine running, and he could make out a shadowy form at the wheel.

The front door was open and a thread of cigarette smoke drifted out. Bledsoe's heart beat faster and his gray eyes gleamed; here was the bandit car, its driver awaiting the return of his pals with the loot. To pass it without being seen was impossible, but after a brief hesitation the brakeman again crept forward.

Nearer and nearer. Now he was on hands and knees, worming his way along in the deeper shadows cast by straggling undergrowth fringing the road. The man in the car shifted his position, glanced around, seemed to grow threateningly alert. Bledsoe froze where he was, and for long minutes did not dare to move. The bandit relaxed comfortably in his seat again and the brakeman inched toward the rear of the car.

He reached it, drew a deep breath and eased around past the rear fender. Carefully he pawed in the dust until his hand encountered a small stone. With a deft flip of his wrist he tossed it over the car. It fell with a smart rap at the far side of the road, clattered faintly and was still. The bandit turned quickly and peered in that direction, intent, listening; and as he faced away from the open door, Bledsoe sprang.

The man got out a single muffled cry as the brakeman's big hand closed on his throat, then he fought in vicious silence. He managed to draw the gun snugged beneath his armpit halfway, but Bledsoe clamped his wrist with iron fingers and jerked the clutching hand away. The brakeman's head rocked from a wicked short-arm blow and dizzy flashes spun before his eyes, but he buried his face against the gangster's heaving chest and tightened his grip on the beefy throat.

A rabbit punch at the back of his unprotected neck almost stunned him, but before it could be repeated, Tom let go the other's gun hand and got in a crashing blow to the jaw. He felt the man shiver and go limp, and as he whirled the sagging form about, the lolling head struck the steering post with a sharp crack.

Satisfied that the knockout was complete, Bledsoe shoved the unconscious robber to the floor and grasped the steering wheel. He had the car now and he would make quick time to where he could obtain help.

Just as his foot found the clutch, a dark form loomed beside the open door.

"All K. O., Curly!" exclaimed a low voice. "All ready to go in a second."

Tom heard the rear door open as the form disappeared; another flitted by

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in the shadows, and another and another.

"All right!" called a voice. "Step on it!"

FOR an instant Bledsoe's brain refused to act; the horror of his situation momentarily paralyzed him. Seated at the wheel of the bandit car with the bandits in the tonneau behind him, mistaking him for the driver whom they called Curly!

"What you waitin' on?" barked a voice. "Get goin'! Step on it!"

His mind still in a daze, Bledsoe started the big car, hunching down over the steering wheel to hide his face, thanking his lucky stars that his uniform cap had fallen off during the struggle and that his own thick black hair had a decided curl to it.

With effortless ease the powerful car moved down the slight grade, swayed around a bend and onto a long stretch of level straightaway. Quickly it picked up speed, the soft purr of its engine rising to a rocketing roar as Bledsoe gave it the gas. A glance at the speedometer showed the needle quivering at fifty. It trembled for an instant and then crept on.

Bledsoe tightened his grip on the wheel and thought furiously; in a very few minutes they would reach the outskirts of Huntington and the first flash of street lights would be his undoing. The bandits would realize they had been duped and the fate of the impostor would be summary and highly unpleasant. Bledsoe had a feeling in the pit of his stomach as if a sizable lump of ice had settled there.

"Taken for a ride!" The expressive phrase suddenly acquired a vivid and nerve destroying meaning. He was taking himself for a ride, and what a ride! A sudden startled yell of discovery, the crash of a shot and a limp form slumping over the wheel! Tom visioned it all, and then with astonishing clearness he visioned something else.

Why hadn't he thought of it before? A terrible chance to take, but a fellow in his position had to take chances. He glanced once more at the speedometer and his fingers moved slightly.

The quivering hand resumed its interrupted crawl. Sixty—sixty-five—seventy—seventy-one—two—three—

"Hey!" bawled a voice from the rear. "You wanta ditch us? No need fer all this hurry!"

Bledsoe bent lower over the bucking wheel and jammed his foot harder on the accelerator. Seventy-five—seventy-six— A bedlam of yells and vivid profanity soared up from the rear as the roaring car struck a bump in the road and danced like a jack rabbit with delirium tremens. The curses turned to howls of terror as Tom took a curve on the left front wheel. A flash light blazed behind him, followed by a profane roar. "That ain't Curly! Plug him!"

Turning his head the barest fraction, Bledsoe yelled:

"You shoot me, and we'll all go to Hades together when my hands leave this wheel!"

A scuffling followed his words and the crash of an automatic, the bullet ripping through the roof just above the brakeman's head.

"You damn' fool, d'ye wanta kill us all?" howled a terror-stricken voice. "He's tellin' the truth. Don't touch him!"

Faster and faster the great car roared through the night; it was all Bledsoe could do to hold the road. The steering wheel bucked in his hands like a living thing, the unrolling white

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ribbon outlined in the blaze of the headlights swept toward him in a creamy wave. The wind howled past in a hurricane blast and the curses of the raving gangsters provided the grace notes for the mad fantasy of discord. With a frightful careen they took a curve and the distant lights of Huntington danced and flickered.

"LISTEN, bo!" yelled a voice above the uproar. "Slow down now and everything 'll be jake. We'll give you a split; there's three hundred grand in these sacks!"

As if he had not heard, the big brakeman bent lower over the wheel and watched the lights rushing toward him. Again the voice yelled—pleading, threatening, trailing off into appalling profanity. Bledsoe set his teeth as they hit the first paved street; the danger of a smash-up was infinitely greater now, but still he dared not decrease the frightful speed. It was his sole protection from the guns waiting to belch death at the first opportunity. He pressed the button and a particularly raucous horn added its screech to the din. Vaguely he sensed figures that danced and yelled.

A taxi loomed directly in front and the thundering car shaved the paint off its tire cover as the terrified driver ran his machine onto the sidewalk. The lights were plentiful now and Bledsoe slackened speed a little, but not much.

Now there was a sudden burst of brilliancy ahead, and Bledsoe's jaw set grimly. Here was the show-down! A wild blaring of horns, a bedlam of yells and a terrified scattering of pedestrians. Into the lighted square hurtled the rocketing car, its driver's eyes on a squat stone building a block distant. Reckless of consequences, Bledsoe killed his engine and slammed on the brakes.

The great car leaped into the air like a living thing, struck, bounded again, slued half around and crashed into a fire plug. Over it went on its side, a hissing jet of water soared up from the shattered plug, the tonneau of the wreck resounded with yells, groans and curses. Bledsoe was hurled completely through the door and sprawled on the sidewalk. From the squat building blue-clad figures were pouring.

The policeman didn't know what it was all about, nor did the others who arrived on the scene at that instant, but they took no chances; and when the tonneau of the wreck yielded two sacks of registered mail and a small arsenal in addition to its bleeding, battered and befuddled occupants, they were at no loss as to what was the proper procedure.

Several hours later Tom Bledsoe awoke to the smell of medicine and an unpleasant headache.

"Nothing serious, son," chuckled a deep voice near by. "Just a stitch or two and a few yards of cloth. You'll be up and about again in a week."

Tom blinked into the twinkling eyes of a grizzled police lieutenant.

"I hate to lose all that work," he growled ruefully. "I'm saving money to get married next year."

The officer laughed uproariously. "Boy," he chuckled at last, "every one of them spalpeens you delivered to the station has a price on him; and there was three hundred thousand dollars worth of cut diamonds in them registered mail sacks. After you get through collecting all the reward money coming to you, you can go to Turkey and support a harem!"

THE END.

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Ravens of the Law

A murder in a Chicago lodging house sent Government Operative Billy Cook on the trail of a counterfeit gang and into the jaws of a tong trap

By W. WIRT

Author of "Jades and Afghans," "The Guns of the American," etc.

Novelette—Complete

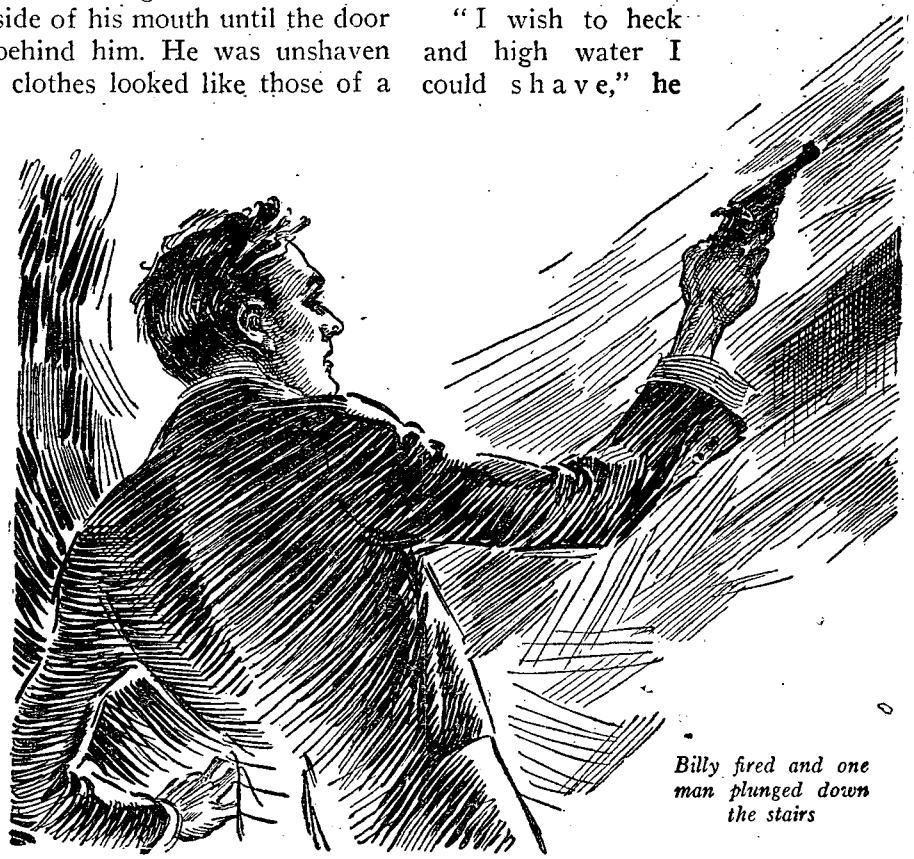
CHAPTER I.

SILENT DEATH.

THE young man entering the drab, forlorn-looking room on the fourth floor of the "flop house" on South Halsted Street, Chicago, maintained the lowering scowl and the tough downward twist of one side of his mouth until the door closed behind him. He was unshaven and his clothes looked like those of a longshoreman who did not care how dirty he was.

But after the door closed the young man straightened up, the scowl left his face, the lips arched into a grin. There was a dingy mirror hanging on the discolored wall above a dilapidated washstand and he went over to it.

"I wish to heck and high water I could shave," he



Billy fired and one man plunged down the stairs

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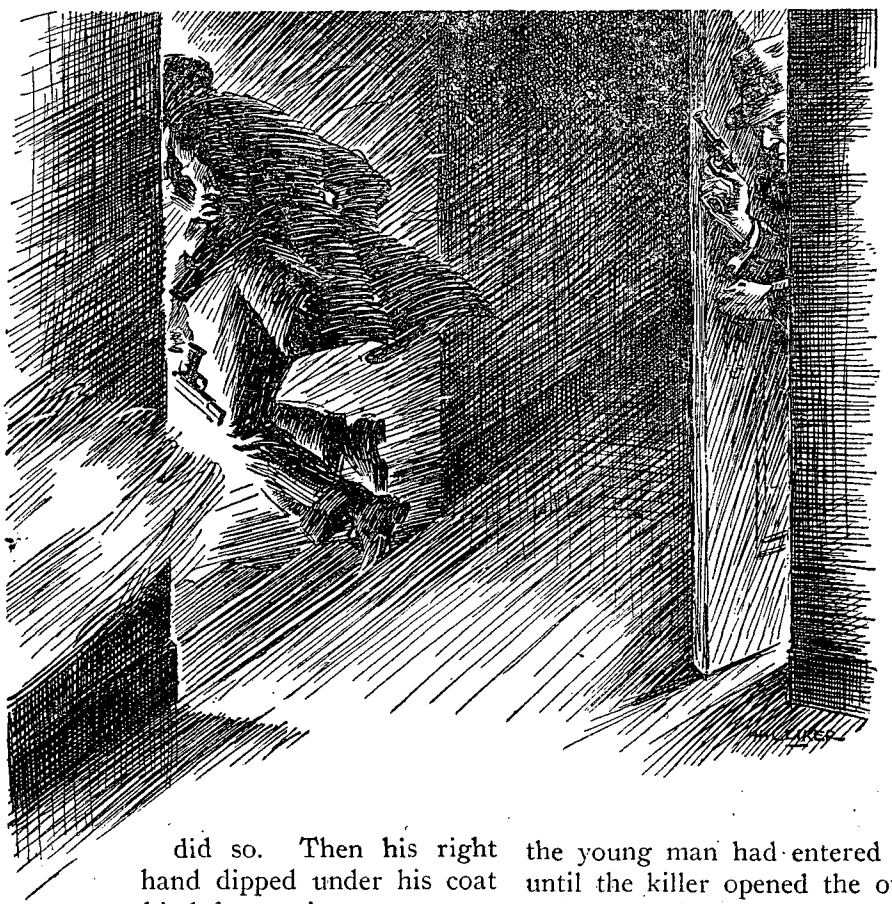
muttered. As he stooped a little to see in the mirror, he heard a sound behind him and straightened up, turning as he



did so. Then his right hand dipped under his coat to his left armpit.

It closed on the butt of a Colt .45 as his eyes saw, in the split second left for them to see anything, a cruel face aflame with the killing lust, the glint of a blade darting at him—then his hand fell away from the .45 butt as life left his strong young body.

The killer eased the body to the floor. There was no need of a second thrust—the first had been driven home by steel-like wrist and practiced yellow hand. Then the killer walked calmly and softly to the door, opened it, and walked out, shutting it softly behind him.

He sauntered unconcernedly down the hall to another door in the rear of the fourth floor. From the time the young man had entered his room until the killer opened the other door and closed it, not three minutes had elapsed.

CAPTAIN JAMES SAUNDERS, section chief, special intelligence unit, Washington, D. C., parked his car in the rear of a beach hotel at Norfolk, Virginia. He walked through the hotel, bought some cigars and a newspaper, and then sauntered down the beach. He sat down for a little while, read the paper, then as if finding the sun too hot, rose and walked along, giving the impression of a man with nothing special to do and all day in which to do it.

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Finally he sat down beside a young man who was lying stretched out in a small patch of shade afforded by the piling of a breakwater. The young man wore a bathing suit. As Captain Saunders sat down, the young man sat up and looked carelessly around. There was no one within a hundred feet or so and after a moment the young man stretched out again. As he did, Captain Saunders said, from behind the newspaper:

"Where's Dutch von Holzman?"

"He's here," answered Billy Cook, one of Saunders's aces. "I got a flash of him about an hour ago."

"All right, here's the angle. You take Dutch and get to Chicago. Never mind the New York thing. The Kwangsi and the Chaotins are gathering the clans for another private little war."

"Yeah? What has that got to do with us?" Billy spoke from where his head rested lazily on an arm.

"A heck of a lot. Put a jaw tackle on."

"She's on, cap'n," answered Billy with a grin. He had served with the grim captain in France with the M. I. and he knew him full well.

"Keep it on. I find that the Kwangsi or the Chaotins are stocking their war chest by passing phony twenty dollar gold pieces. I sent Johnny Evans on to knock off whoever was supplying them, and—"

Billy Cook forgot about the jaw tackle. "For Pete's sake, that's secret service stuff. What are we horning in for?"

"None of your damn business," answered the doughty captain promptly, as he turned a sheet of the newspaper.

Billy grinned cheerfully and waited. Finally Saunders said: "I didn't mean quite that, Billy. They are busy on a lot of things and came to me, knowing that I had fussed around in these tong troubles before I got a desk. I lent them Johnny Wade first. Then I sent Martin Combes."

"Holy cats! You mean that both of them have gone west, captain?"

"Yes. They got Johnny on the street and Martin in his room. Johnny was machine gunned and Martin was stabbed through the heart."

"Who was covering them?"

"Young Pete Mason was with Johnny, and Wesley Harden was with Martin. You know Harden. He was up in Detroit with Johnny Hatfield."

"Yes, I know him. He's a good kid. Are they still there?"

"Harden is. I sent Mason south."

"There's a leak somewhere," Cook said slowly, turning to get in a more comfortable position, shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun.

"I know that, you nitwit. If I didn't, would I have passed the word to New York for you and Dutch to meet me down here? If you had fifty per cent more brains you would still be forty per cent short of being a two per cent moron."

"I never got as high as percentage, so that bawling out is entirely lost, capt'n, please suh."

"Yeah? You and Dutch start pronto and get out there. Harden is at 1780 Duan Avenue on the South Side. He's got all the dope there is—which isn't much. Contact him. Do you need any money?"

"No, sir. I've got plenty and Dutch always has a bank roll."

"All right, I'll be moving out. No reports to me until the finish. If you have to uncover, use your old M. I. number, and tell Dutch to do the

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same." As Saunders folded the paper and started to rise he added softly: "I'm relying on you and Dutch to get the men who killed those two boys of mine."

"We'll get 'em for you, captain," Billy answered.

A GIRL, sitting in the living room of a Washington apartment, put a magazine down and reached for the telephone receiver as the bell rang.

"Hello? Yes, this is Miss—Smith. Yes, I recognize your voice." She listened for a moment, then said: "That is William Cook. No, he lives in New York." Another wait, then: "No, I wouldn't know his destination. That is not handled through me. He probably has his book of transportation requests. Yes—yes, I will. Am I not—" A pause, during which the girl's not unattractive face became flushed with anger. Then: "I had no intention of saying anything. Yes. Yes—as always." And the girl put the receiver back on the hook.

As she did so, Billy Cook, down in Norfolk, was talking into another telephone. "I was tailed from the beach, Dutch. Two of them. One is in front of the hotel, and the other in the rear, I guess, waiting for old man Cook's son William. Can you hear me, you Dutch cheese?"

"Sure I can hear you. Talk lower and look out for the hall. 'Von' is German, not Dutch, ignoramus. That I have told you seven million times." No matter where "Dutch" von Holzman was, he would explain that. He did not mind being called "Dutch," but if any one referred to his nationality as Billy had just done, Dutch made the correction. He might have a German name, but he was one hundred per cent American, as his people had been since they landed in Pennsylvania a century before. Dutch's record as a special agent equaled Billy Cook's if it did not top it. So clever was Dutch that during the war he served on the staff of the crown prince as Major von Holzman und Rothberg, and at the same time was number O. B. 40 as far as a little London room went.

Billy laughed. "I've been a moron and now I'm an ignoramus. Pardon me, you German cheese. It's a Chicago thing. To-night from Washington on the twelve six Western express. Cover me."

Dutch evidently protested, because Billy, after a pause, grinned and said, "Nothing doing. I'll take care of these two mugs. If we don't contact *en route,* remember that dump down on Fourth Street . . . It might be, at that. If it is, meet me at the corner of Wilson Avenue and Clark. O. K., Dutch. Fair enough, old kid," and Billy put the receiver back on the hook. His face was not flushed and angry as the girl's had been, but was eager with the joy of the combat to come. In the service, whenever Billy Cook's name was mentioned, some one would say, "Yeah, boy, you said it. I'd rather work with that bird than any one I know. Only the man don't live that can convince the darn fool that everything isn't one heck of a joke."

IF Billy had a book of Government requests he made no attempt to use them as he reached the ticket office at the Union Station in Washington. A well dressed, smooth-shaven man of forty, who had been standing by the information desk, reached the window right after Billy did.

"Chicago," Billy said, with a grin at the dapper clerk. One of his firm

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convictions was that, nine times out of ten, a grin would beget a grin. This time it did, and the clerk promptly grinned back at Billy and asked, "When and also how?"

"On the twelve-six Western to Chicago."

"Want a berth? Only drawing-rooms and uppers left, though."

"I'll take an upper. Drawing-rooms are too rich for my blood."

The clerk laughed. "O. K. with me. Upper twelve, car one twenty. That's the last car and easy ridin'. The Western has quit pulling an observation car on number fourteen."

As he handed Billy the ticket and Pullman check, the man beside Billy said, with a smile, "Kill me with the same dose. One to Chicago, and an upper. Drawing-rooms are too rich for my blood too." As Billy turned away the clerk said, "Upper eleven for you. Same car, one twenty."

The train was made up and the Pullman conductor was sitting at the long table in the waiting room. As Billy handed him the ticket and the berth check he did not see the man who had stood at the window with him. On the way down the platform Billy said to the porter, a very sporty looking young gentleman of color, "What is your name, boy?"

"Mah name is Lucian, capt'n."

"All right, Lucian. Listen hard and get it the first time. See this ten dollar bill? Well, they hunt in couples. The other one will join this one when we reach Chicago."

"Yes, suh. Ah listens so hard dat Ah gits it befo' you has spoken, fo' twenty dollahs." He nodded, presently. "Yes, suh, Ah can fix it. Mah goodness, dat's easy." Once again Billy's grin, as he handed over the ten dollars, brought one in response. Of course the ten dollar bill may have had something to do with the porter's grin.

The train had been going for half an hour when Billy, sitting in the smoking room, looked up at the man who had stood by the window near him.

"Hullo," the man said as he sat down. "Can't you get to sleep in one of those damn berths, either?"

"I don't have any trouble," answered Billy, offering the man a cigarette, "only I don't like to cork up until she's got a good start. Then I can sleep my head off. Once I hit the pillow I'm sunk until morning, no foolin'."

"I wish I were that way. Hard enough for me to sleep in a lower, let alone an upper. But I was so close to cases that I thought I better stand it. Business has been rotten lately."

"Western," thought Billy. "Gambler, probably. 'Kill me with the same dose,' and 'down to cases.' Wonder if he'll try to use a gat?" With his lips he smiled and said, "I should say it is rotten. Well, I guess this man's train has rambled far enough for me. I'm darn good and tired. See you in the morning."

"O. K., buddy," the man answered. "Let's have breakfast together."

"Suits me," Billy said as he left.

An hour later the man called for the steps to get him up to his berth. As he started to climb he asked the porter, "Are we crowded to-night, George?"

"No, suh, not yet. Ain't nobudy in de drawin' rooms 'cept one man. De lowahs is occupied. De gentleman dat's snorin' and you is de only uppahs. Lots of people git on endurin' de night, mo' or less."

"That feller in twelve is tearing it off, isn't he? Hope he doesn't keep me awake."

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"Us gits to Hagerstown in five minutes. Maybe-so he turns on de side when de train stops."

"I hope he does. All right, George."

INSTEAD of trying to go to sleep the man lay in the berth, fully clothed. A black bag had been put in the berth by the porter. The man switched off the light after he had taken off his soft felt hat, an evil smile on his tight lips. He heard and felt the train come to a halt and then, in a few moments, the porter escorted some people into the car. They seemed wide awake, talking and laughing until the porter quieted them.

The man listened for a moment, then said softly, "He's stopped that damn snoring, anyway. I'll give him another hour." As he spoke he felt for the black bag, opened it and brought out a hypodermic needle. It was not very large, but it contained a deadly oriental poison that would kill instantly and leave no trace. He felt the sinister thing over lightly with slender, well-kept hands, then smiled. "You will wake up in hell, you dirty rat of a government copper," he whispered. "One hour more of life for yours."

It was fully an hour later when the man cautiously parted the curtains and looked out. The car seemed absolutely deserted. With the grace and ease of a big cat he swung out of the berth to the floor. There was no sound in the movement. He stood still for a second, looked both ways, then stepped across and lifted both hands to the curtains of upper twelve. One hand, the right, held the syringe, the other he used to part the curtains. He was a tall man and needed nothing to stand on to bring his head and shoulders on a level with the berth. His left hand performed its function and the right hand went in, one long finger, the little one, stretched out to touch any part of the body he was sure lay there awaiting the prick of the needle.

There came a rustle to the left of him and he turned his head, ready to say hurriedly, "I'm trying to wake my friend." But, as he turned, a black-jack landed just over his left ear. It was a heavy jack and the force behind it was from a muscular arm. There was a sickening little "plop" and the man crumpled to the floor. As he did, the door of the first drawing-room, which had been a little open, swung wide.

"For Pete's sake, Dutch!" Billy Cook said in a low tone of voice. He knew that a whisper carries much further than ordinary tones. "Bring him in here, quick."

Dutch von Holzman stooped, got the man under the arms and dragged him into the drawing-room. The door shut and the car was as silent as before.

Billy put on the light as Dutch laid the man down on the seat. The drawing-room had not been made up. "What do you mean, butting in?" he demanded fiercely. "I had him."

"You told me to cover you, didn't you?" Dutch asked calmly. He was a well set up, blue-eyed young man, with short blond curly hair, typically "Prussian officer" in appearance despite his American training and ideals. "Well, I thought I was doing that—until you spoke."

"Where were you?"

"Back in the aisle against the water cooler. What do you care? What next?"

"See how bad— He's dead, Dutch."

"I knew he was when I picked him up," Dutch answered indifferently. Both he and Billy Cook had seen serv-

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ice in the Military Intelligence and both had played the world-wide game of "kill-or-be-killed" for so long that the sight of the dead face staring up at them did not even cause them to blink an eye.

"No hat," Billy said. "Look what he's got in his right hand, Dutch. I'll bet there's enough poison in that baby to kill an elephant, no foolin'. Stick around until I get his hat and bag. He's going to get off in a few minutes."

DUTCH grinned but did not answer. Billy came back in a couple of minutes with the man's hat and black bag. "Duck soup," he said cheerfully. "The porter and the train crew must have all said good night and tucked themselves in. Put that damn thing in the bag, Dutch, while I go and take a look-see if the way is clear."

"If they find him along the right of way, Billy, there will be one grand holler."

"About which we should worry. And why so much of a holler? This bird's one of the gang, boy. Will they come forth and yelp? I'll answer my own question; they will not. The explanation is that he went goofy, got his bag and walked off the rear end. Wait a minute until I do a little scoutin'."

Billy grinned when he reëntered the drawing-room. "All clear. Take his feet, Dutch, and his hat. I'll take the bag and—hurry up, he's commencing to bleed. Is there any on the seat?"

"No. He's lying the wrong way. Let's go."

They carried the body to the rear of the car and out into the vestibule. Then they calmly threw it off the train, along with the hat and the bag.

"And that's that," Billy said. "What car you in, Dutch?"

Dutch grinned as he answered, "I've got the drawing-room next to the one you were holed up in."

"Boy, it must be great to be rich. Let's get into it." Briefly he related the precautions he had taken. "So," he concluded, "I ditched the porter and while the train was stopped at Hagerstown, eased into first drawing-room. I knew it commanded the aisle of the car. I was all set to collar my 'breakfast partner' when you came by like a ghost highballing it for home. How come you to get in this car?"

"Easy," grinned Dutch. "I was sitting over back of the information stand and as soon as you and your boy friend left the window I went over. I didn't even have to ask for the same car; I got it without asking. That bird at the window said, 'Only thing left in the Chicago cars are uppers and drawing-rooms in car one twenty.' You know something, Billy?"

"Darn little. I know that 'von' is German and not Dutch for one thing."

"Yeah? Well, here's another thing for you to know. After you passed the gate, the gent we just unloaded slipped a note into the hand of a girl who eased past him. Right now she is in one of the lowers, old kid."

"Holy cats! We can't caress a girl over the ear with a blackjack. What kind of a looking girl?"

"A beauty, with black hair and eyes and a skin like the petal of a tropical flower. Little hands and feet and—"

"Boy, I can see that your old training in the school of 'describe the person that just walked through' sure stuck. Well, I think I'll cork up here with you, Dutch, until it gets light. No use makin' the Gods of Luck mad mit us, ain't it, you Dutch tulip?"

"German, not Dutch," corrected

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Dutch placidly, as if there were no such things as dead assassins lying along the tracks, with sightless eyes staring up into the sky.

CHAPTER II.

MANCHU EYES.

BILLY went back to his upper about six o'clock in the morning. The porter, who had been sound asleep in the smoking room, had awakened as Billy came in to wash up.

Later, the porter swore to high heaven, "Dat gent'mum in uppah 'leven goes to baid an' in the mawning he wasn't dare. Dat's all Ah know."

And that was all he did know. Billy had tipped him to unlock the first drawing-room door when the train pulled out, then make himself as scarce as possible. If the first drawing-room by any chance was taken—then the second or any of them. When the porter woke up, he said, "Capt'n, doesn't yo' need de steps?" To which Billy replied, "Yeah, to get back up."

So all the rest of the people in the car knew, if they were at all interested in the matter, was that the young man in upper twelve got up about eight, went to the washroom, shaved and then went into the diner. About nine, after all the berths were made up and Billy was sitting looking out of the window, a girl came by. She did not give the impression of looking for any one, but Billy knew that she was, just the same. Dutch's description had been too accurate for him not to know the girl. She passed through the car into the one forward. In a little while she came back and sat down in her section. A little later she bought a magazine, but did not do much more than riffle the pages before she laid it down.

"Wondering the how come," Billy said to himself with a grin.

After the first call to dinner the girl got up, looked around for a moment, then started forward toward the diner. Billy was right behind her and as they reached the diner it looked as if they had come in together, the girl walking ahead. The car was fairly well filled and the dining car conductor escorted them to a table for two without hesitation. The girl had not looked back and it was not until she was seated that she became aware of Billy's presence. As he sat down he said pleasantly, "Good morning."

The girl, evidently an old traveler who knew the customs, smiled and answered, "Good morning."

She did not say anything else! Neither did Billy, until the waiter had gone with the two food slips. Then Billy said, "It doesn't look as if there has been much rain in this part of the country, does it?"

"No," the girl answered. "It was raining so hard when we left Washington that it seemed as if it must be raining everywhere else in the world also. I am glad it has stopped, aren't you, Mr. —"

"Cook," answered Billy, with a grin, "William Henry Cook, to give you all of it at once. Yes, I am glad it has stopped. I don't care very much for rain."

"Neither do I, Mr. Cook. My name is Wilson, Mr. Cook."

"And?" Billy said, the grin still in evidence.

"And what?" the girl asked.

"Manchu in spite of the Wilson," answered Billy.

Miss Wilson laughed, a soft, amused little laugh. "You are—very clever, Mr. Cook. My mother was Manchu. Aren't you also a little personal?"

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"I didn't mean to be. I've a darn bad habit of looking at people and trying to figure out their nationality. There are so many different races all mixed up in America that names do not mean a thing sometimes."

"So you immediately, if the opportunity comes, ask people to see if your figuring is correct, is that it?"

"Yes'm, that's it," Billy answered very meekly. "And I'll confess that sometimes I do not get a smile and a helpful answer, either. Last night the man who had upper eleven across from me got blame good and mad when I asked him. He came in to smoke a cigarette and he seemed friendly enough. So I looked at him and figured that he was—"

THE waiter arrived with the dinners and Billy stopped talking. His tone had been an easy conversational one, like that of a man talking to kill time. The rest of the time spent in the diner was devoted to eating with only a remark once in a while about something seen through the window. The girl finished first, paid her check, left a substantial tip, smiled and nodded to Billy and left the car. Billy finished his meal leisurely, then went back to car one twenty. As he passed the girl on the way to his seat he grinned cheerfully but did not stop.

An hour later Miss Wilson rose and walked back to section twelve. Billy, who had it all to himself, was sitting on one seat, his feet up on the other. He promptly removed them and rose. "I'm glad to see you," he said. "Want to sit by the window?"

"Thanks, I would like to."

"Now," Billy said as he sat down beside her, "put your feet up and make yourself comfortable. We're not due in Chicago until around eight."

Miss Wilson rested a pair of trim little feet up on the forward seat, making no attempt to hide slender ankles and graceful legs. Then she smiled at Billy. "Tell me about the man in upper eleven. What did you figure his nationality was, Mr. Cook?"

"Cousin Jack," answered Billy promptly.

"Cousin Jack? Why—I don't believe I know what—"

"Cornishman," Billy said with a grin.

"Oh, an Englishman. Well, was he?"

"I don't know. I asked him and he said it was none of my darn business. I tried to explain that it was nothing personal, but strictly scientific. That I was writing a book to be called 'Nationalities at a Glance,' but I couldn't seem to make it stick," he added with a grin.

"He must have been a very peculiar man. Where is he now? I haven't seen any one sitting there."

Billy thought, "hook, line and sinker," as his lips were framing and uttering the words: "Darned if I know. I couldn't sleep, and right after we left Hagerstown some one came through the car and stopped right in front of this section. I heard whoever it was say, 'Hurry up, we get off in a minute or two,' and then some name that I didn't catch. I thought at first he was talking to me, so I looked out. He wasn't. He was talking to the man in upper eleven, so I pulled my head in and tried to go to sleep. I heard the man get down from the berth and—"

"But the train didn't stop for hours after we left that place. How could any one get off?"

"It slowed down at some junction. Remember? I was awake and could tell it. Maybe they got off there. Any-

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way, he unloaded, because his bag is gone."

The girl was looking out the window and, as Billy finished, said absently, "But Wang Chi couldn't have—" She stopped suddenly and, turning her head, looked at Billy. Not a muscle of his face had changed; neither had the expression in his eyes. He was looking at the country flashing past the windows on the other side of the car. His long training, a good deal of it undergone where a slip of a muscle would mean death, prevented any change. But inside he was saying, "What luck! What absolute luck! Holy cats, what luck!"

HE turned to the girl. "I beg your pardon, Miss Wilson. I was looking at the boats on the river. Did you say you had something in your eye? Let me see if I can get it out."

"Yes—but I think it is out now." she paused. "I guess the man must have left the train as you say. Are you well acquainted in Chicago? The reason I ask is because I am not, and we get in when it is dark. I've been visiting my sister in Washington and decided to take the trip to Chicago at the last minute. We have some friends there, but they live out in a place called Evanston. I understand it is quite a way out from the city."

"Well, I've been there three or four times, but I'm not so darn well acquainted either. I know that Evanston is part of Chicago now. That is, it is built up all the way out there. It used to have its own separate government as a village, I think. Maybe it has yet, for all I know. Anyway, you can get a train out there from the Northwestern depot about every fifteen minutes. And once there you can take a taxi to your friends. How's that?"

"That will be fine; only how far is it from the depot where we arrive to the other one?"

Billy laughed. "Don't tell me that an old traveler like you is afraid of transferring from one depot to another even if it is all of eight bells."

"How do you know I am an old traveler, Mr. Cook?"

"I can tell," answered Billy with a grin. "I don't mean old in years, but in experience."

Miss Wilson laughed, "That's right, I am." Then she added, and Billy's trained ears caught just a shade of sadness in the musical voice, "Very old in experience."

"So am I. I've been fussin' around ever since I was ten years old. I've got so every time I see a train or a boat, I automatically reach for a toothbrush and a handkerchief. Chicago is all right, for all you read in the papers. Cutting out the gang stuff, it's darn well policed. You can get from one depot to another without even being kidnaped, so don't worry, miss."

The girl smiled. "I won't any more, then. Do you think that—that you—would you mind very much if I asked you to escort me over to the other depot and put me on the train for Evanston?"

"Not at all," Billy answered promptly. "I'll be glad to. All I've got to do until to-morrow morning is to get to my hotel. I'll land you right smack at your friends' house, if you say so."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Cook, but it won't be necessary, thank you. If I may impose upon you as far as the other depot it will be quite all right."

"And your pa was English," Billy announced.

"How do you know that?" demanded the girl.

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"The way you said 'quite all right.'"

"You are, as I have said, very clever, Mr. Cook." The girl took her little feet down and rose. As she did, Billy did also. "I think I can sleep a little," she went on as Billy stepped out in the aisle to let her pass.

"Go ahead," he answered. "I'll be right here. Want a pillow?"

"No, thanks, I have one," she smiled, adding: "Please don't get off while I am sleeping, like the man in upper eleven did."

"I won't. No getting off for me until you are safe on the Evanston train."

MISS WILSON went to her section and Billy could see her adjust the pillow against the window before she sat down. After fifteen or twenty minutes Billy walked into the forward car, sat and smoked a cigarette, then walked back. In passing the girl on the way back he looked at her. She really was asleep. The rest of the people in the car were reading or dozing, and Billy, after hesitating at his own seat as if not knowing whether to sit down or not, finally walked along.

He went to the rear of the car, looked out at the track for a moment, then suddenly turned. No one had followed him, the girl or any one else. He started back and as he got to Dutch von Holzman's drawing-room, entered it. Dutch looked up from the magazine and grinned.

"I don't dare stay but a minute, Dutch. She's on the hook but I haven't set her. Ever hear of a bird named Wang Chi?"

"Sure, he's topside man of the Kwangsi tong."

"Ye-ah! For the want of a nail the shoe was lost. For the—"

"I know the rest. Thought you could only stay a minute. What are we on, Billy? I don't know any more than a rabbit."

"No time to tell you, Dutch. We are—or rather we were right between the Kwangsi and the Chaotins, hunting for cluck-shovers."

"Which are some outfits to be between. Who're we between now?"

"For the slip of the tongue, the way was cleared. How's that for poetic language, major? Now I know it is Kwangsi gents who are going to play ring around a rosy with us."

"You mean they are already playing it, don't you?"

"Yeah. Listen. I've been invited to escort the young lady over to the Northwestern depot on our arrival in Chicago. In a taxi, Dutch."

"You better not, you damn idjut! She'll slip a needle into you. Lay off taking those fool chances, Billy. Be content with what the God of Luck has already handed you."

"First a moron, then an ignoramus, and now an idjut. I'm improving every day. Stick around and cover me, Dutch."

"How the heck can I if you're in a taxi? You do a little listening, old kid. For once in your life, quit thinking everything is a joke. It don't take long to jab a needle, and once it's in you—"

"I don't think she'll try it. I think she'll ease me along to some place where the big shots are. I don't think that wah-wah I handed her about the man in upper eleven went over very far. They'll want to know what really happened to him. Right now she's guessing."

"Yeah? You know the ways the gentle, playful Chinks have of extracting information as well as I do. Hop

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right to it, William. I'll be seeing you."

Billy laughed as he reached for the door. "I hope so."

NIGHT had fallen when the train arrived. The depot, as usual, was crowded with people either getting on or off trains.

"Tell you what we'll do," Billy said to Miss Wilson. "I'll check my suitcases here, then we won't have so much to pack around."

"All right; that is a good idea. But I can carry my bag. It isn't very heavy."

"Mine are. There's the check room over there. Come on over."

She laughed and answered, "You seem to have taken me in charge, Mr. Cook."

"And how," Billy answered with a grin.

There was quite a crowd around the windows of the check room and it was fully five minutes before Billy and the girl started toward the stairs leading up to the street. Now Billy carried her traveling bag. All Miss Wilson had to carry was her shopping bag, which hung from a strap. It was one of those things that women carry, voluminous enough for all the various articles that they feel they cannot be without.

There was a big crowd coming down and going up on either side of the brass rail that divided the stairs. A police officer stood at the bottom. Billy and the girl approached from the right and stood for a moment, waiting their chance to get into the line. The depot at this point was not so very well lighted. It was illuminated, but not well enough to enable any one to see details—unless he had unusually keen sight.

There was a sudden eddy in the crowd going up, and as Billy stepped forward to take advantage of a cleared space a man came swiftly by him, brushing Billy's right shoulder. It was a hard brush, delivered with a stiff shoulder, and it spun Billy around. As he turned, the girl said, "Oh!"

Billy saw the dangling ends of the strap which had held her shopping bag. The girl was holding her hand up, an expression of utter astonishment on her face. Some of the crowd heard her and at once stopped, as crowds will.

The police officer pushed his way through, arriving just as the girl stammered:

"He—he cut the strap and took my bag!"

"Yeah?" the officer said. "Which way did he go? Come over here. Go on, keep going!" This to the crowd. "On your way. Nothin' but a little purse snatchin'. Go on, now."

The crowd, as another officer arrived, obeyed.

Billy, the girl, and the officer edged away from the line of people.

"Which way did he go?" the policeman demanded again.

"I don't know. I think he dodged behind the stairs. I was so surprised that I didn't notice. I was looking at the strap."

"Oh, yeah? A fat chance we've got to find him. What did he look like?"

"Why, I don't know that, either. He had his hat pulled down over his eyes and his head was down. He was about as tall as Mr. Cook here."

"What did you have in the bag?"

"I had—nothing of much value. About twenty dollars in money, I think."

"Yeah? Well, I can't stand here. He's probably halfway to Michigan Avenue by now. Go on over to the sta-

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tion house and leave your name and address. It's on Madison and Warner. We'll see if he is still stickin' around, which he ain't. Them birds play the touch-and-go stunt."

After the policeman had walked away Billy said: "Holy cats, right after I was telling you that Chicago was well policed. Was there anything in the bag that was valuable?"

"No. Except the money. No papers or letters or anything. That is, nothing of value to him."

"What they generally do is to take the money out and throw the bag away. Well, I'll lend you twenty dollars, Miss Wilson. It's my fault. I should have been watching out for a thing like that."

"Thanks, Mr. Cook." She seemed to have gotten over her surprise now. "I won't need it—that is, I won't need all of twenty dollars. If you will lend me taxi fare and—"

"How are you going to get to Evanston without money?"

"Why—I don't think that I will go now. There isn't anything I can do—I mean that I'm a little nervous and—"

"Well, if you go to a hotel you will need money. What are you going to do—wire your sister in Washington?"

"No. I have some other friends here that I can call up from the hotel. If you will lend me ten dollars, that will be sufficient."

"Here it is. What hotel are you going to?"

"I don't know. What hotel do you go to?"

Billy could see in the girl's calm eyes that there was no more in that question than the words implied. To give Mr. William Cook credit, he did not for a moment think there was.

"I generally go to the Newland. I can have you fixed up there, if you wish. It's a nice, quiet place."

The girl looked at him steadily for a moment, then smiled and said, "I know that it is—if you say so, Mr. Cook."

"Well, we will now promenade back to the check room. Are you keeping that strap for a souvenir?"

The girl laughed and tossed away the remainder of the strap.

CHAPTER III.

A VOICE IN THE WALL.

IT was three o'clock in the morning when Billy sat with Dutch von Holzman, looking at the contents of the girl's bag, spread out on a bed in the Fourth Avenue rooming house they had agreed upon as a rendezvous. They were both looking with narrowed eyes at a hypodermic syringe which lay a little to one side of a lacy little handkerchief, compact, and the other feminine necessities.

"I don't believe it," Billy said slowly. "I don't know much about girls, but I know that she wasn't that kind."

Dutch, who had no illusions at all, grinned. "You never can tell, Billy. The more beautiful a snake, the more poisonous the bite. Remember Mata Hara? She looked like a madonna, and she sent many a man to his death before we—"

"Yeah? But you could see it in her eyes."

"Well, I hate to bust your little balloon, but in the syringe there was enough deadly poison to kill a regiment, old kid."

"What do you mean, was?"

"Exactly what I say. I called up Bob Gunnell, who is the most chemical

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chemist there is. He got up out of bed and came over and took the stuff to analyze. Just before you arrived he sent a note over. Want to read it?"

"No. Tell me."

"Why so short and snappy, Mr. Cook? The stuff is a Chinese poison named Kaiting."

"Which tells me one heck of a lot, doesn't it?"

"This may tell you more. Kaiting kills instantly, allee same bullet in the heart, and ten minutes afterward no trace of it can be found. The heart just stops beating. It generates some kind of a gas that does the work and then leaves the body."

"Yeah? Let's make contact with Harden."

"I have. He doesn't know anything except that he is glad of our arrival on the firing line. He said that neither Martin nor Johnny Wade had been able to crash the gate of either the Kwangsi or the Chaotins."

"Were they trying to do that?"

"Yeah—at least Martin was. He unearthed their headquarters."

"Whose?"

"The Chaotins'. There's a Chink here that Martin had by the short hair for some darn thing and he was doing a little flying for Martin."

"It's the Kwangsi that we're after."

"You mean that are after us," Dutch corrected with a smile.

"That's right," Billy answered with a grin, having recovered from the sight of the syringe. "And that reminds me. What was the giddy idea of turning into a purse snatcher? Also, the next time you give me the stiff shoulder don't do it so hard."

"Well, I was covering you, wasn't I? I knew darn well that I couldn't with you two in a taxi and I figured that I'd remove the fangs of the so beautiful serpent and then let her bite you all she wanted to."

Billy laughed. "Much obliged for the cover, old-timer. It was fast and darn accurate. Let's get down to cases, Dutch. I want to be back at the hotel before daylight."

"What's the idea, Billy? We can get in on the Kwangsi without your deliberately giving them the chance to knock you off."

"That is exactly what I am going to give them. Not the Kwangsi, but the birds that are passing the counterfeit, doing the cluck shoving. I don't think the Kwangsi have anything more to do with it than supplying the poison."

"Yeah? And that's plenty. Listen, old kid Cook. If they haven't, how come a Manchu is mixed in? Dope that out for old man Von Holzman."

"Did you spot that, too? You only saw her for a second."

"That was plenty long. That girl is Manchu or has Manchu blood. All right, she hasn't any connection with the Kwangsi. Where do we go from here?"

"I go back to the hotel and act as bait," Billy said, grinning. "What is the first thing she will do, Dutch?"

"Get contact with her outfit and tell them you are in thus and such a room at the Newland. That's kindergarten stuff, Billy."

"I'll get you up in the first grade pretty soon. Then what will they do?"

"Try to decoy you out of the room. Failing in that they will try for you there, either with the girl or some other biter."

"Who will try for me?"

"For Pete's sake, Billy! What is the—well, to humor you, either the Kwangsi or the cluck shovers will. Whichever the girl is with."

"I'll quit, Dutch. Here, we'll be

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hooked up for them, whoever they are. The idea is to make them come to us, not for us to go out hunting them."

"Yeah? Well, it's a rotten idea, you poor prune. Whoever they sent would get killed. Then how much ahead are we? Do you think that the bird who tries for you will break down and cry on your shoulder once we catch him—or her? And the chances are a hundred to one that we'd have to kill to stop him or her or it from going through. Get another idea."

"PERHAPS I may be able to supply an idea later," said a suave voice that seemed to come from the wall behind them, higher than their heads. Both Billy and Dutch von Holzman dropped to the floor at the sound of the voice, then twisted around so as to face the wall. And as they faced it both had .45 Colt revolvers in their right hands. But there was nothing to shoot at except the steady muzzles of two double-barreled shotguns that came out of a hole that a picture had covered. The shotguns pointed, one at Billy and the other at Dutch.

"Drop your guns, you fools," the voice snarled a rasping command. "Drop them or take a load of buckshot. Before I count three."

"I can't locate it, Dutch," Billy said calmly.

"Neither can I," Dutch answered, just as calmly.

There came a mocking laugh. "I am speaking through an angled tube, Mr. Cook. Believe me, please, when I say this is strictly a matter of business. Drop those guns before I count three or, as I say, take a load of buckshot. One—two—"

Both Billy and Dutch laughed and dropped their Colts. "I have a feeling," Billy said, "that we are not hooked up at the moment to take a load of buckshot, Mr. Voice."

"Which you certainly would have got," answered the voice, coldly. "Now stand up and raise your hands above your heads."

Both Billy and Dutch obeyed instantly. "That's it," the voice went on. "Tony, put your shotgun down and go in and tie the gentlemen up. Sam, keep them covered."

A moment later the door opened and a big, heavy-set Latin walked in. He was so wide across the shoulders that he had to turn a little to get in the door and his hands, as they dangled at his sides, came below his knees. He looked more like a gorilla than a human being. In his left hand he carried several cut lengths of rope. There was a pleased grimace on his more than ugly face as he started over toward Billy and Dutch.

"Take the black-haired one first," commanded the voice. That was Billy Cook. But Billy did not wait to be taken. As the big man reached for him he ducked under his arms, placing Tony between himself and the shotgun muzzle.

What happened then happened all at once. Billy Cook's right arm came down like a lightning flash. As it did a revolver came into his hand. It detonated once and as it did the sharp metallic "ping" was drowned out by the roar of the shotgun. Billy was covered by the big man whose back took the charge, all but one buckshot. That curtained Dutch von Holzman's face with blood. Dutch pitched forward like a poled ox.

The big man went down, too, driven by the force of the buckshot. Billy Cook evaded him, shot twice at the hole from which the smoking shotgun

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still protruded, jumped over the still body of Dutch von Holzman which lay, face to the floor, arms outstretched. Not a second's time was lost between the roar of the shotgun and Billy Cook's getting to the door.

He had been trained in a hard school, this Billy Cook of whom it was said, "He thinks all life is one heck of a joke." His grim cold face belied that statement now, as he cleared Dutch von Holzman's inert form. At the moment he was all trained special agent doing what he had been taught to do.

As he made the hallway of the rickety building a man was running down the stairs from the floor above. Billy Cook did not know who he was; more, he did not care. He shot once and the man fell the rest of the way down. From a room down the hall there appeared a man's arm, the hand holding a revolver. As Billy shot at the man on the stairs, a head appeared back of the arm. Billy, halfway to the stairs leading down, did not even halt. He shot at the head as he ran and it disappeared like a jack going back into the box.

Down to the second floor, down to the first and along the hall to the door without seeing any one ran Billy, revolver ready to issue death in return for a threat of death.

AS he started to open the door it opened on him. A uniformed policeman lunged in. If the man Billy had killed upstairs had been big, this copper was still bigger. His outstretched arms enfolded Billy, revolver and all.

"Where the devil do ye think ye're goin'?" demanded the copper. "Gimme that gat, ye half pint, or I'll—"

"Government business," snapped Billy, half smothered in the bearlike embrace. "Let go of me, you big mick."

"Mick, is it? I'll take ye apart wid —ye shoot, me bucko, and see what happens to ye when the boys get here."

This last because Billy had wiggled around and now the muzzle of the revolver was pressed under Officer Casey's double chin.

"Pull, heck. I will though if you don't turn me loose. There's a dead Federal agent upstairs and I—"

"What? Why the devil didn't ye say so?" The big arms, strong as two pythons, released Billy. "Is that on the level?"

"Yes. Come on up." Billy had no intention of going to the police when he had started his dash from the house. The Federals could attend to their own matters. But the second he saw the copper he knew that unless he killed him, there were explanations to be made and that he was uncovered, as far as the police went, at least.

As Billy spoke, two more coppers came crowding in, nightsticks in one hand, police .38 specials in the other.

"What the devil, Casey?" one of them demanded.

"This lad says that he is a Federal dick and that there's another wan upstairs, dead."

"Yeah? Tom, stay at the door here. Bring him up, Casey. We'll go and take a look at the dead Federal dick."

But there was no Dutch von Holzman to look at, dead or otherwise. There was no man huddled at the foot of the stairs. There was no door a little open down the hall and there was no dead Latin. There were not even the lengths of rope.

Billy took one quick look around, then laughed. "Fast work, Mr. Voice, if you can still hear me. All right,

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you birds," to the two coppers, "here it is for you. Another agent and myself were standing here and—" Billy told what had happened. As he got to the part about the hole in the wall, two detective sergeants walked in.

"He's right so far. Here's the hole, and," the policeman sniffed, "the smell of powder is here, all right, all right."

"Look on the floor," one of the detectives said, pointing. "Blood in two places."

They found blood at the bottom of the stairs and after opening the door that Billy pointed out as the one the man's head had come from, they found more blood.

"Where could they have got to?" asked one of the coppers.

The detective sergeant who had taken charge laughed. "This is an old panel house, my boy. In the days when things were wide open, many a hot one was pulled here. She's got more secret passages and turning wall panels than any dump in Chicago."

"Holy cats," Billy said, "something tells me that I'm not near as smart as I thought I was."

"Come and tell it to the inspector. You ain't shown no credentials that I can see."

"I left 'em on the dresser at home," Billy answered. "Let's go. One thing for which I am duly thankful is that my buddy isn't dead."

"How do you know?"

"Well, intuition tells me that they wouldn't have much use for a dead Federal agent and that they would have use for a live one," answered Billy.

ONCE at the station house Billy called up the United States district attorney and that gentleman promptly got dressed and came down. He also had once possessed an M. I. number. There was handshaking all around and offers of assistance, then Billy was driven to his hotel by the D. A.

"Now that you are uncovered, Billy, what are you going to do?" the latter asked.

"I was already uncovered to the bunch I am after. I'm going to take a long breath, dive under and see how close I can come up to Dutch von Holzman. I think a lot of that Dutch—I mean German—cheese."

The D. A. laughed. "Want any help?"

"No, thanks. Wait a minute Are O'Neill and Swenson still deputy United States marshals around this neck of the woods?"

"Yes. Both of them. And of all the unmitigated hellions that the good Lord ever put on the face of the earth, those two highbinders are the worst."

"That's the kind I'm after, and the more unmitigated they are the better I like 'em. I am beginning to think that my unusually clever strategy refuses to strat. I'm going to start rough-housing. Wait until I can think of some place that doesn't have panels and secret passages and whatnots. As a special agent I am a fine ribbon clerk."

The D. A. laughed. "Every one slips, Billy. Charge this one off against some of the times in France that you didn't. Why not drive out toward my country place to-morrow?"

"Which is where?"

"Out on the Garden Road from Lake Forest. There's a clear stretch there that doesn't allow of any tailing. Stop just after you have crossed a little rustic bridge where the road forks. Raise your voice and it may be possible that those two smoke-eaters will hear it."

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"I'll be there at ten o'clock. Thanks, judge."

Once in his hotel room, Billy called the room clerk. "This is Mr. Cook talking. Room eight fifty. Will you please see if you can get room five nineteen for me? Miss Wilson."

In a few moments the message came: "Miss Wilson checked out about one o'clock, Mr. Cook."

"Thanks," Billy said as he hung up. As he turned away from the phone he muttered, "Now I know damn well that Dutch had the right slant on my ideas in general." After that he put on his hat again and went out to make contact with Wesley Harden. He knew that Dutch was in no immediate danger, if alive. Whoever had him would at least try to extract information from him before killing him, if they did not use him to bait a trap for the one who had killed and got away.

CHAPTER IV.

"SOON YOU WILL DIE."

WHEN Dutch opened his eyes he was lying on a couch in a large, well furnished room. His head, although bandaged, did not feel very sore.

A man sitting by the window reading a paper heard Dutch turn. He lowered his paper and said, "You were creased. The bullet went along your skull just deep enough to knock you out. You *sabe* creased?" It was the voice from the wall.

"Yes," answered Dutch with a grin, "heap plenty *sabe*. What happened after I passed out of the picture?"

The man, smooth-shaved, white-skinned, with thin lips and cold blue eyes, smiled. With his lips, not his eyes.

"Your buddy shot twice at the hole the shotguns stuck out of, then jumped over you and went out the door. He shot and killed a man who was running down the stairs and another who started to try for him from a doorway. As he opened the front door, the police arrived."

Dutch laughed. "In the well-known nick of time. What then?"

The man looked at Dutch out of wintry blue eyes, then smiled again.

"You're there, feller," he said. "Most men in your position would be worrying about what was going to happen to them personally."

"What is written, is written," Dutch answered cheerfully. "Neither you nor I, nor all the Chinks in China and elsewhere, can change that. Don't you, a gambler, know that?"

The man ignored the gambler part of the remark as he said, "I think it is written that very soon you will wish that you had never been born, Mr.—"

"Von Holzman," supplied Dutch readily. "Otho von Holzman. And you?"

"You may call me Adams, Mr. von Holzman—during the short time you have left to call any one anything."

Dutch smiled. "I gather by that I am to be thrown to the wolves."

"You are. What department are you in?"

"Special Intelligence," answered Dutch promptly.

Adams smiled. "Are you sure it is a special intelligence unit, Mr. von Holzman? You and your friend did not show much intelligence in going to that building."

"We, especially my friend, were chosen for fast action rather than intelligence, Mr. Adams. How did you like the sample you got?"

Adams laughed. "It was very good.

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And yet, if Tony had not blundered, I doubt very much whether you, or rather your buddy, would have been fast enough."

"How did you get a line on us?"

Adams smiled as he put his feet up on the window sill. He seemed to have plenty of time and to be not at all adverse to conversation. And he seemed perfectly sure that nothing could interfere.

"I learned through an intercepted telephone message that Mr. Cook was leaving the hotel. He was tailed here, Mr. von Holzman, and I arrived at about the same time. While you and he were discussing various matters I made arrangements with the landlady and bought the house for the night. Get what I mean?"

Dutch smiled. "That means that everything in the house belongs to you for a certain number of hours, doesn't it?"

"Exactly. She ran all the roomers out that she could and the rest were notified to stay in their rooms—if they wished to continue in good health. The landlady was once—shall we say that she was of the old school?"

"Anything you wish," answered Dutch with a grin. "Well, that's that. Since you are so ready to issue information, how did you remove me, with the police at the door?"

"I not only removed you but also I removed the men your buddy killed, Mr. von Holzman. While not qualified for the Special Intelligence I may say without boasting that I am known to be fairly fast myself. There is another stairway hidden behind the walls which leads to a tunnel, which in turn leads to an old warehouse. Cars were there and we got away. Does that relieve your mind?"

"Very much so."

"Fine. Now perhaps, as you have nothing to worry about, you will answer a few questions. You will answer them anyway, later."

"If that is the case, I might as well answer them now," Dutch said with a grin.

ADAMS smiled, a cold little smile that hardly moved his lips. "The first one is what happened on the train?"

"If you are referring to the gentleman who occupied upper eleven in car one twenty, he got off right after the train pulled out of Hagerstown. Rather his body did. His soul got off five or six minutes before. I connected with a blackjack just over his ear. Then we threw the body off and went to bed."

"I see. He evidently did not know that he was sitting in a game with the —Special Intelligence. How did you and Mr. Cook know that he was connected with the matter?"

"That was so easy that we did not have to use even a little of our ordinary intelligence, let alone the special. Mr. Cook was tailed from the beach and discovered it. I was covering Mr. Cook. Do you want details?"

"No, they are not all necessary, thank you. You say that you were covering Mr. Cook. Do Federal dicks always work in pairs, one covering the other?"

"Depends on the case," answered Dutch promptly. "That's like, 'how deep is a mine?' Sometimes they do—four or five of them all dove-tailing in. Other times they play a lone hand. Then again, there will be one man and another to cover him. But one thing is sure, Mr. Adams, once they start coming, they keep right on coming; by ones, twos, threes and fours, until what

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they are after is in the bag. Do you think that because you and yours have killed two Federal agents that Uncle has run out of them? You have talked very frankly with me because you think that I am as good as dead. But, do you remember the story about the king and the ravens?"

"No," answered Adams. "Tell it to me."

Dutch grinned. "Well, once there was a king who could not sleep. He wanted a story told that would last forever and he offered half his kingdom to the man who could tell one that would never end."

"You are not on the Arabian Nights, are you?"

"No, this is different. The penalty was that if the story ran out, the story teller lost his head. Well, man after man tried it and lost his head. Finally a man came and, after the preliminaries, began:

"'The King of the Indies had great warehouses that covered a square mile of land. In them he stored grain until the warehouses were full to the roofs. He was very proud of the vast store of grain and would not sell any of it. But, one day along came a raven who flew in the open window of the warehouse, left opened high up so that air could get to the grain. He took a single kernel in his mouth and flew away with it. Then came another raven and he flew in, took a kernel in his mouth and flew away with it. Then came another raven—' and so on. The story teller went on bringing ravens until the king hollered 'nough and divided the kingdom. Do you get the moral of the story, Mr. Adams?"

Adams smiled. "Very plainly, Mr. von Holzman. One Federal agent will come after another until we are finally landed. Is that it?"

"Exactly. No matter how well you think you are hooked up or how well you think you are dug in. One after the other, Mr. Adams, until you and the Kwangsi are—feenish."

"You mention the Kwangsi. What have they to do with it?"

"Plenty. We know all about it. Want to send for my clothes and come up to the captain's desk with me? You might as well get it over with. You won't get anything worse than the hot seat."

Adams laughed. "No thanks. In spite of the ravens. We'll wait until we run out of—various things, before we begin to worry about them."

"There is a way that they can be stopped coming—at least for quite awhile," Dutch said calmly.

Adams's feet came down from the window sill. "Say that again."

"I said that there is a way that the ravens can be held away from the grain—for, say, two months, anyway. How much time do you need to put the operation over?"

"That would be ample, Mr. von Holzman," Adams answered suavely. "Just what do you mean?"

"Are you the top-cutter?"

"Yes, as far as our end goes."

"Has any one else got to be consulted?"

"Yes. One other man."

"All right, get him here and I will tell you what I mean."

Adams looked at Dutch von Holzman from eyes that seemed suddenly to have become filmed. Dutch's blue eyes stared blandly back.

Finally Adams said, "Fair enough. It has been done."

"Many times," agreed Dutch, "by the right people."

"Two months. For how much?"

"Get the man here."

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"O. K. Take a little nap and when you wake up he will be here."

As the door closed behind Adams, Dutch grinned cheerfully, but made no attempt to take the suggested nap.

IT was a little more than three hours later when Adams came back. With him was a tall, immaculately dressed man. The newcomer's cheekbones were high and, although his eyes did not slant up at the corners in the slightest, he gave the impression of being an Oriental.

"Manchu," Dutch thought. "Getting close."

As Dutch sat up on the couch, Adams said, "This is Mr. von Holzman, Mr. Chi." He did not introduce the man to Dutch, neither did the man bow.

"You have something to say?" he asked, curtly.

"This," answered Dutch, just as curtly. "Pay my partner and me ten thousand dollars and we will keep any more Federal agents from coming here on this case for a period of two months."

"Why should we pay you money? We already have you and soon will have your partner."

"Tell him the story of the ravens," Dutch said to Adams.

"Mr. von Holzman has been telling me a story," Adams said smoothly. "He means that Federal agents will keep on coming—until they, as Mr. von Holzman says, have arrived at the finish."

"How much of the activities of Mr. Adams is known in Washington?" asked Mr. Chi coldly.

"Washington knows all about Mr. Adams—and his associates' activities. All except the location of the plant where they make the twenties. And one thing more—where the leak is that has enabled you to dispose of two agents and know that two others were put on the case."

"One other," corrected Adams, with his winter-cold smile. "We were not tipped about you, Mr. von Holzman."

"That part of the matter does not interest me," Chi said. "You say you are open to be bribed. How could we know that you can keep others from coming and that you will play fair?"

"You surely know that if two agents on a case report that they are progressing slowly but surely, that no others will be sent unless they are called for."

"That," Chi said after a moment, "is no doubt true. How are we to know that such reports will be sent?"

"That's easy. Get Billy Cook here, give us enough to drink and any entertainment that we wish, and we will stay here. The reports can be mailed from here after you look them over. We are trusted men and will be let alone. Put five thousand dollars to our credit in a bank as soon as the first report is sent to Washington. Pay us the other five thousand after the two months are over; the game law is lifted and we are all in the clear to do what we want to. Cook and I will make a few unimportant pinches and let it go at that."

"What is to prevent us, at the end of the two months, from killing you both instead of paying you?"

"The story of the ravens ought to. You'd have two more dead Federal agents—and the knowledge that two more were on their way after you. Listen, both of you. Uncle never quits. He may be sidetracked, but don't kid yourselves about his quitting. He isn't that kind of a huckleberry. I asked Mr. Adams how much time he needed

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and he said two months. For ten thousand dollars we will hold off any interference from Washington. After that time, take your chances—as we will. That's plain English, isn't it?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Chi, his face impassive, "very plain. You say that you are trusted men—yet you ask for a bribe."

"That's easy, also. We are thirty-six hundred dollar a year men, with a seven dollar a day allowance for expenses. We have seen other men, all around us, buy fine cars and finer homes or whatever they wish. For years we have risked our lives daily. Last month, while in New York, Cook and I decided that if the chance came we also were going to get into the money. But it must be a chance where we run no risk. I am not offering to sell Uncle out. You have not enough money—or torture either—to have me do that. I will tell you nothing about any department or about any men. All we will do is to create two months' delay for you. After that we will come and get you if we can."

Chi studied him intently, for a moment, then said, "Send for your partner."

"How?" asked Dutch, concealing his elation.

"Write a note. I will see that he gets it."

"All right. Get me paper and ink."

Dutch wrote, then handed the note to Adams, who read aloud:

BILLY:

I was creased by a buckshot. O. K. now. What we spoke about in New York has come up. Come alone with the bearer of this note, who is O. K.

FIVE ONE.

"What is the Five One signature, Mr. von Holzman?" Chi demanded.

"My number in the Military Intelligence. Cook will know that the message is from me—and that I did not send it under pressure. If he is phoned to or another message is sent to him in any way, that number should be used."

"Where is he now?"

"At the Newland Hotel under his right name, William Cook."

"I will see that he is reached with your message. If it is a trap your body will pay, taking a long time to do it."

"What trap could it be? The moment Cook hears or sees that signature he will know that things are O. K. Federal men work alone, Mr. Wang Chi."

"It will be well for both of you if that is so. I will return to talk to Mr. Cook on his arrival. You be here also, Mr. Adams."

It was an order to Adams, not a request, this last, delivered as Wang Chi reached the door. As it closed behind him, Dutch von Holzman grinned. "I have a hunch that your pleasant little playmate does not care much for the layout. If I were you I would have plenty of gun-slingers within call when he arrives. He'll have the second corps of hatchetmen with him, I bet you."

Adams smiled. "I have been able to take care of myself up to date, Mr. von Holzman."

CHAPTER V.

INTO THE TRAP.

BILLY COOK was sitting in his room reading a magazine when a knock came at his door. "Come in," he called. The door opened and a chambermaid entered with some towels over her arm. "I've brought you some fresh bath towels, sir."

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"That's fine," Billy answered, his eyes going back to the magazine. "Put 'em in the bathroom."

The chambermaid walked into the bathroom and came out in a moment with two or three unfolded towels in her hand and walked out, shutting the door carefully. The regular chambermaid had been in much earlier.

Billy, who in his leisure moments dabbled with playwriting, said to the magazine, "Act one, scene one; the assistant to the villain enters to see if the coast is clear."

Three minutes later the phone rang. "Mr. Cook?" A man's voice.

"Yes, this is Mr. Cook talking."

"Well, Mr. Cook, I have a message for you from Five One. Do you know who I mean?"

"Yes, I know."

"The message, which is written, will be delivered to you at a certain place, Mr. Cook. Do you care to follow instructions explicitly?"

"I will follow them, yes."

"Very well. I know that there is no one with you in your room at the moment. When you have received the instructions you will put the receiver back, get your hat and leave the room. How long will that take you, Mr. Cook?"

"A slow count of five."

"You will be allowed that. Once out of your room you will be covered, so I will not add any warning about trying to signal any one. Two of our men are in the lobby to see that no one follows you from the hotel. Is that plain to you?"

"Very plain."

"If an attempt is made to follow you from outside the hotel, your friend Five One will regret it very much."

"No one will follow me. I know what Five One means."

"O. K., then. Now, listen. Walk out of your room, walk to the elevator, do not speak to any one in it, walk through the lobby, making no signals and stopping to talk to no one. Go out and take a street car to West Madison and Halsted Streets. Do no talking on the way. At those streets you will get off and get on a southbound Halsted Street car. Ride to the end of the line and then walk three blocks to the right. Got it?"

"Yes, I've got it. Begin the count when you hear the receiver go up."

"O. K., feller."

Billy hung up the receiver and as he did the door of the room adjoining opened. Wesley Harden's head appeared.

"I got 'er, Billy," he said.

There had been an extension wire run in from the phone in Billy Cook's room by the house electrician and Wesley Harden had been sitting with earphones on, ready to hear what came over Billy Cook's phone from the time the chambermaid left the room. If some one had entered Cook's room instead of phoning, there was a neat little hole cut through the wall behind the radiator, for which Mr. Cook had paid the hotel a goodly sum.

"Get out to the car barns with the army and cover me from there," Billy commanded as he went for his hat. "That Halsted Street car takes an hour and a half to get to the end of the line. You've got plenty of time. Take the boulevards out and cross over. Allow half an hour for the trip. That Five One thing meant bring up the troops. Got it, Wes?"

"Yeah, boy," Wesley Harden answered as he shut the door. Billy was out in the hall a little late for a slow count of five, but not late enough to excite any suspicion. There was a man

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standing at the elevators waiting to go down, and as Billy got into the elevator the man followed him.

EAGER, yet unhurried, Billy obeyed the directions given him and when he reached the designated spot he halted. It was fairly well out in the country and where Billy stood, the street angled out into two roads, one a trunk line as shown by the traffic on it. Near the corner there was a little candy store and, as Billy stopped, out of it came Miss Wilson. As she walked up to Billy a car came by. A man leaned out and made a little waving signal to her. It evidently meant "Go ahead," because she nodded and as she passed Billy said, without looking at him, "Follow me."

Billy waited until she was fifteen or twenty feet ahead of him on the main road, then calmly sauntered along behind her.

She turned into a lane and stopped beside a sedan that was parked just off the macadam.

"Get in," she ordered curtly.

"Do you want me to drive?"

"No. I will drive. Get in, please."

As Billy walked around the front of the car to get into the seat beside the driver, he took a quick glance about him. He saw a long, powerful-looking car begin to edge away from the curb a block the other side of the candy store. As the girl was getting in he said: "It's a nice day for a drive, isn't it?" To himself he said, "The army is among those present."

Miss Wilson drove for three or four minutes without saying anything, down the main road. There were numerous cars passing, and it took all of her attention to clear them. Finally, as they reached an open place she handed Billy the note Dutch had written.

Billy read it, laughed, and then tore it into little pieces, letting them drift out of the window on his side. He made no comment on the note, and it was fully ten minutes more before Miss Wilson asked:

"What are you doing with such an awful thing?"

"What awful thing?" asked Billy, who had been thinking of something a thousand miles away.

"You know what I mean. It is just like a man betraying his country in time of war."

"I see you know all about it, Miss Wilson. Who told you?"

"My uncle told me, if you must know."

"That doesn't tell me very much. Who is your uncle?"

"My uncle is Wang Chi of the—Oh, what good does it do to talk to you? You are selling your government."

"Which is some sell," answered Billy with a grin. "How come your Uncle Wang Chi to be telling you all about everything?"

"None of your business."

"That's right, it isn't. Only I'd like to know."

"The reason he told me was because I asked him to spare you."

"To spare me? Holy cats? From what?"

Miss Wilson did not answer the question, but said, her eyes on the road:

"Then he told me what a jackal you are. A man who will allow himself to be bribed while working for his country. He made me see that you were not worth sparing."

Billy grinned. "I'm improving each and every hour. I've been called a moron, then a nitwit, then an idjut, and now a jackal. It is a darn bad

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thing to do, Miss Wilson. I mean the selling of one's country—not calling me a jackal."

The girl slanted a scornful look at Billy's face, but did not answer.

A LITTLE later Billy asked: "Will you answer a question for me?"

"I don't know whether I will or not. What is it?" the girl said curtly.

"Did you know that the hypodermic in your bag held enough poison to kill six hundred and eighty Federal agents?"

"In my bag? Then—then—who got it?"

"Dutch von Holzman. Did you know?"

"That is a lie. It contained a sleeping potion. You are not to talk to me any more."

"I won't if you will answer one more question. Does your uncle send you out with many sleeping potions?"

"No. That was the first time. Up to then I had only met people for him and brought people to him as I am doing now. He sent me to Washington to do what—the man you killed on the train ordered me to do. Now, keep still."

"I will, double still. By gosh, here is a thought. Supposing something happened to your uncle, what would you do? Keep on working for the tong?"

"I thought you said you would keep still. I do not work for any tong. Tongs are composed of men, and only men work for them. I would go to England and live with my father's people, who are— Why are you asking me these questions?"

"Not a darn reason in the world except to pass the time. I'll keep still from now on."

"I wish you would," Miss Wilson answered coldly.

She drove steadily at a fair rate of speed. There were many cars on the road, and she had all she could do to keep her place in line. It was getting dark when she turned off to the right onto a dirt road. As she did, she put on her lights, as many of the cars already had done.

The dirt road was not in good repair, and the car she was driving was a light one of popular make, not at all new. The engine and the body made so much noise that neither she nor Billy could have heard the car that turned into the dirt road a little behind them. This car ran without lights, as silently and smoothly as a big jungle animal slipping through trees in search of its kill.

Finally Billy said, as darkness settled down:

"For Pete's sake, how much farther is it? We haven't passed a house in five miles?"

"You see those trees ahead on both sides of the road?"

"Yeah, dimly."

"We turn there. See that light to the left?"

"Now I do. Is that where we are going?"

"Yes, that is where we are going."

As she said that, the car entered the timber, which was fairly thick on both sides of the road.

"Pull over and stop," Billy commanded.

"What? I will not. What are—"

She did not finish the sentence. Billy's left arm had gone around her neck and his hand had closed over her mouth. His left foot pushed her little one away from the gas and his right hand shut off the ignition, then went to the wheel.

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As the car came to a stop at the side of the road the girl was struggling fiercely with him. But Billy Cook had held much bigger persons; and after a brief scuffle, in which she brought her knees up in an attempt to kick at him, Miss Wilson was still. She realized she had no chance in a physical combat.

THE silence lasted for but a second. Another attack came, this time more deadly; but Billy was ready for it. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen a huddled figure concealed beneath a robe in the rear of the car. Now the robe was dashed to one side. Billy seemingly did not see the man until the fellow swung his blackjack. Waiting just such a blow, Billy flung himself away and the blackjack only hit his shoulder a glancing blow. He winced with pain, but he could not slow down now. Spinning clear about, he grabbed the weapon from the hand of his surprised assailant, swung it in an arc, and crashed it against the man's skull.

Seeing the figure slump to the floor of the car, Billy turned again to the girl, whose wrist he still held in his left hand.

"Will you keep still if I let go of you?" he demanded, as the car behind them drew up.

The girl nodded—that was all she could do.

"All right. I'll trust you," and Billy took his hand away just as the door of the car opened.

"Beat it for a minute," Billy ordered Wesley Harden.

Mr. Harden promptly shut the door and backed away a few steps. There he was joined by O'Neill and Swenson.

"What's comin' off?" O'Neill demanded.

"Ah don't know," Harden admitted. "Billy said to wait a minute, and what he says goes."

In the car Billy was saying: "Now, you listen to me. There is no bribing in this family. Five One means 'bring the army'—not 'come and be bribed.' If your uncle is up there, he's going to be good and dead in about five minutes. You turn this car around and start for England and keep right on going until you hit there. Got enough money on you?"

"Yes, but— Oh, I knew all the time that you could not—"

"Tell me about it in England some time. I'm giving you a break for that 'spare him' stuff, and I'm sure that you don't know what this is all about. Get going now—no, wait until you hear shots or see that our car is up to the house, and then start. Good-by, Miss Wilson."

"Oh, I—I will. Good-by, Billy."

But the door on Billy's side had opened and shut behind him.

"Can you get by this car?" Billy asked as he reached the three men.

"And how," answered Swenson.

"All right. We'll go right up as if we were the car they're looking for. They've spotted the lights if they have any lookouts. Let's go. Once there we'll walk right in. I'm fed up with all this strategy stuff."

"That's the boy," O'Neill said happily, as they ran for the car.

As they swung around the girl's car, Billy said: "That kid don't know what it is all about. Her uncle was using her for a cat's-paw. Do any of you birds know anything about her?"

"I nevah saw the lady, and I nevah heah tell of no lady in this case," answered Harden promptly.

"Me neither," said O'Neill. "What kid? I never saw no kid."

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"Maybe-so Billy is dreamin', ain't it?" asked Swenson as he started up a narrow lane. "Talkin' about kids no one ever saw or heard about."

DUTCH VON HOLZMAN sat in what had once been the front parlor of the big old rambling farmhouse. The chair in which he sat was against the wall to the right, fairly close to a double window. Adams and Wang Chi sat side by side, more or less facing the door that led into a hall, over to the left center. Three men, all well dressed, all smooth-shaven, with hard eyes and tight lips, stood near Adams. All of them looked exactly what they were, Western gamblers. Directly behind Wang Chi there stood in a little group, five Chinese, their faces as impassive as if carved in jade.

"I hear the car coming with Mr. Cook," Wang Chi said smoothly. "It may be well, Mr. Adams, if we send our—shall I say bodyguards—out of the room while we question him."

"Suits me," Adams said indifferently. "There wasn't any need of having any of them—"

The sound of two shots came from in front of the house. No matter the time or what was going on, Adams always had two men as lookouts. They had seen the car coming and, knowing that the girl was expected with someone, had no reason to think that it was any one but the girl and the person she was bringing to the farmhouse. They discovered their error when they got close to the car and both promptly drew their guns. That is all they had time to do before they went down with .45 Colt bullets in their brains.

As the shots came, both Adams and Wang Chi sprang to their feet.

Dutch von Holzman rose also. "I told you not to start killing his hatchetmen until I gave the signal," he shouted to Adams, looking straight at him.

"So that is it?" Wang Chi said. Then he snarled an order in Chinese.

Adams had looked at Dutch in utter astonishment, then started to say: "What the devil do you mean, you—" when Wang Chi interrupted.

Dutch von Holzman's clever brain had acted instantly in spite of his deadly peril. There was only one thing to do, and he did it. That was to make Wang Chi believe Adams and Dutch had framed him in some way. Dutch knew that Wang Chi was suspicious of a frame of some kind and was not even friendly with Adams. The proof of that was that he had brought five men with him.

In an instant the room seemed to explode. As the Chinese drew guns from the wide sleeves of their blouses, the men with Adams drew from shoulder holsters. Adams drew and fired at Dutch from the hip. The bullet hit Dutch in the chest, high up, because as Adams pulled trigger a bullet from Wang Chi's automatic was tearing its way through the counterfeiter's shoulder, causing his arm to jerk up.

As Wang Chi fired, the Western gamblers were pouring a sheet of lead into the Chinese, who were answering it. Dutch went down as Billy Cook and Wesley Harden came through the door. O'Neill's gun, hand and arm, then his shoulder and head came through the window under which Dutch was now lying. Swenson came in after Harden. O'Neill's first bullet sent Wang Chi, who was facing the window, reeling back against the wall, then to the floor, dead before he reached it.

Adams turned and shot it out with

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Billy Cook. But he was already wounded, and now he faced one of the fastest and most accurate guns in the Service. His first shot went high, cutting a grove across Billy's right shoulder. His second took Billy's hat off—and his third went into the floor as he fell, fatally wounded.

Swenson was shooting at the two Western men, standing there fighting it out as Western men do—not like city gangsters, who shoot and run if they see the odds are against them. None of the Chinese were on their feet now. Wesley Harden had attended to them and to one of the gamblers.

No two men could stand long against four guns, all of them steady and true, and inside of five seconds both of the calm-faced gamblers sank to the floor, their guns falling from nerveless hands.

Instantly the firing ceased. The room, with its dead and dying, the grim, cold expression in the eyes and on the faces of the government officers, who stood there with smoking guns in their firm hands, if painted, would have been a vivid portrayal of "Those who live by the sword, die by the sword."

For a split second it was as if all in the room were frozen. Then one of the Adams men raised his head from the floor. He was dying fast, the blood trickling from his mouth. He saw Adams's face, and tried to crawl over to where he lay.

"Bob," he said thickly, "they got me. Waring—you—get up and give 'em hell—" His face went to the floor again.

Billy Cook whispered an awed oath.

"What is it, Billy?" asked Harden.

"He called Adams 'Waring.' Helen Waring is Captain Saunders's private secretary. Wait until I see if they got Dutch, then get me to the nearest telegraph office."

But the wire that Billy sent was not delivered to Captain Saunders until noon the following day. The captain had been out of Washington and when he did receive it, there was other news for him also. The Associated Press had sent the story of the battle all over the country, and the morning papers had put out extras. The dead body of Helen Waring was found in her Washington apartment and beside it was a note to Captain Saunders:

> When you read this I will be dead. The only thing I can say is that Robert Waring, who went under the name of Adams, was my dearly beloved brother, for whom I would do anything. I was the leak—and now I am going to answer to God for sending men to their death. It may be that He will understand. I ask that you try to.

As Billy Cook said "telegraph office," Dutch von Holzman sat up.

"I'm all right," he said thickly. "Get goin', Billy."

O'Neill came in as Dutch spoke. "Hey, Billy," he said, "I spotted a lad comin' out of one of the barns. All that counterfeiting stuff is there, and—Well, for the love of Mike!" He stared at Dutch. "I thought you were dead."

"Well, I'm not. I'll be out in two weeks," Dutch answered.

He made a little mistake there. It was a month before Mr. von Holzman would leave the hospital.

Billy laughed. "They couldn't start to plug up a Dutch cheese in two weeks, you big hunk of nothing."

Which was by way of telling Dutch how much Billy loved him.

"German, not Dutch, Dummkopf," corrected Dutch as he settled back.

THE END.

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Benson groped through the smoke toward the girl's cabin

Bentfinger

When the lights went up in the dining saloon of the Arcturus, Shanghai bound, the captain lay dead on the floor—and his murderer was one of that white-faced circle around the table

An East-of-Suez Novel

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "The Last Battle," "The Blade of Don Beltram," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

A HOODED slayer, crafty, malignant, has baffled police from Scotland Yard to Cairo. Shooting his victims in the temple with deadly accuracy, he leaves but one clew—a typed card bearing the single word, "Bentfinger." Precious jewels are his mania, and it is apparently for these that he kills.

It is a mere whim of chance that causes Benson, of the American consulate at Pahang (who is telling the story), to saunter down a lantern-lit street in that city and encounter a death combat between a hooded figure and a French sailor. The dying sailor whispers the name of his fleeing assailant — Bentfinger — and Benson rushes off in pursuit. At the river, Bentfinger plunges into the stream, closely followed by Benson, clambers aboard the steamer Arcturus, and disappears into the depths of the ship.

Benson being mistaken for a stowaway, is knocked out by the bos'n. When he comes to, the ship is two hours out to

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sea toward Shanghai. He demands to be taken before the captain, but he and First Mate Hague pause outside Captain Lane's door as they hear the captain arguing with a woman, telling her she should not have come aboard.

Benson, finally seeing the captain, is surprised at the fear shown by that official when he hears that Bentfinger is aboard his ship. Benson is warned to act as though nothing had happened, and to pose as a passenger. Going to the saloon he meets the other passengers; a typical Dutchman named De Stroon; the Reverend Norwood, a gaunt-faced missionary; Major Phillipots, of the British Navy, and his wife; an enigmatic man named Gorn, a silk buyer, whom Benson catches in the act of reading a news item about Bentfinger; Dr. Ernest Wonger Smartbeck, dressed as though for a character part in a play; Stephen Blair, who appears to be a well-set-up young planter; and a Miss Brown—the girl who had been arguing with the captain in his cabin.

Captain Lane enters the saloon, starts to tell the company of the presence of Bentfinger. The lights go out, a shot is fired. As the lights are turned up, the captain is seen lying on the floor, a bullet hole drilled in his temple.

CHAPTER III *(Continued)*.

UNEXPECTED IDENTITIES!

THANK heaven for men like First Mate Hague, for his voice had never stopped. Men from outside came into the saloon, and the captain was better with a kindly cloth over his face and gone. And the Scotchman was thundering: "Quiet, all of you. Quiet!" Searing every one of us with a white-hot eye and ordering us in a row against the sideboard behind the table. "I'm in command now. What I say is law." His gun covered us where we stood in line. "I'll kill the first one of you to make a false move. I saw that card on the table. I saw where that shot came from, too. It came from somewhere at that table. *Some one of you fired that—*"

"I didn't fire it!" Major Phillipots bellowed from a purple face. "It came from the other side of the table. From that end—"

"It did not!" Dr. Smartbeck shrieked. "It came from your side! It came from down there at that end where—"

"That's a lie." The voice of the Dutchman, De Stroon, shook with fear and anger, and he stabbed a glance of hate at the fuzzy-headed Smartbeck. "Could I have fired that shot without a gun? I haff no gun. Herr Gott! You all look at me! I am looking at this man, this missionary. This Reverend Norwood. *Ja.* He has a gun. I saw him loading it in his cabin last night. The door was open—"

"That isn't true!" the missionary panted. "This Dutchman's insane! Why should I—a man of God—carry arms? Why should I have slain the good Captain Lane? How could I? I tell you that shot came from down there by that man—" He pointed toward Blair.

"But it didn't!" Blair rasped. "I'll prove it. It didn't come from this end—not from me. Good heavens, I can't tell where—"

"It seemed to come from the *middle* of the table," the man named Gorn snarled. I thought he glanced at me; then he was glaring boldly at First Mate Hague. "Any one here could have fired that shot, yes. Grabbed out a concealed gun, leaned across the table in the pitch dark; fired. Any of us could

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have done it. Any of us. You're an army man, Phillipots. Used to guns. You, De Stroon. And Blair, here. Planters. Mean to say you never carry arms? The women, too. And the missionary. All of us. This man, Benson, had a gun on him when he came into the saloon to-night. I saw the lump in his pocket. Hold us up, Hague. Give us a search—"

"I think," Blair growled, interrupting Gorn's unexpected speech, "that a gun-hunt will do no good. The lights went out. The shot. Then you see that open port-hole? That's where the gun went. The killer threw it out of that port. I heard you, Smartbeck, ask the steward to open that port—"

"For air!" Dr. Smartbeck screamed. "You fiends are plotting against me. You murderers!" He rocked back and forth on his heels, his face twisting beneath the dandelion blossom. "I am an epistemologist. A student of theories on cognition. A college professor—"

"Who turned out the lights?" Norwood raised his yell. "That's the killer. Find out who—"

"*Ja!*" De Stroon squalled. "And if any one could do the shooting, how about this woman on the floor under the table? So! The wife of this army major. *Ja!* How about her, too, so—"

Faster and faster went the voices. Faster and faster spun the room. Hints. Accusations. Denials. I remember how the Scotch ship's officer waited, like rock, immobile, grim, purposeful in the din, his gun unswerving to catch the first break. I remember how Mrs. Major Phillipots crawled out from under the table, stood tottering with breast aheave and cheap jewels glittering, gave one wild stare at the captain's empty chair and fainted, again. I remember how the girl stood at the end of the line, motionless, her face in her white hands. How the rest of us jigged in line like so many lunatics, waiting for more to happen.

MORE happened, all right. Vaguely I was aware that the doorway behind the Scotch mate had become crowded with armed sailors who watched us down the barrels of leveled Winchesters. A man with a black beard and an officer's cap wearing the insignia of second mate dodged across the floor at a word from his superior, and stepped down the line of us, patting pockets. All but two of us were guiltless of firearms. But the hip pocket of the silk buyer, Gorn, divulged a 9-mm. Luger automatic that had not been fired. From me, you understand, he filched a Webley that had been jammed. The two guns clattered on the checkered cloth.

"No others armed, sir."

And then, because things happen without rime or reason, a red-headed young Britisher, the ship's third officer, burst through the wedge guarding the saloon doorway, and flung words and gestures at the mate:

"The radio, sir! Cabin's empty! Sparks ain't there, sir! He's gone. Can't find him nowheres. Bos' says he seen him last at two bells off duty an' headin' for a scoff up in the mess room. Then—it was just before all them lights went out aboard us, sir—the bos' says he seen Captain Lane headin' for the radio room in a hurry. Whether Sparks was on deck then or not, the bos' don't know. But Sparks ain't to be found. I've had the whole watch out huntin', but there ain't no trace of that operator. But his cabin's open, sir. And the radio instruments are *smashed*—"

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A hundred times I'd opened my mouth and nothing had come out. Now the words came like a torrent; I heard myself blurting the mad story of my own part in this jabberwocky—the chase back in Pahang, my boarding of the Arcturus, the yellow hands, the queer assassin, the murder of the French sailor, my talk with Captain Lane.

A weird concerted cry went up when I bawled out the name: "Bentfinger!" And my listeners yelled when I stammered the climax:

"Captain Lane was going to wireless the police. And he was coming down here to tell us something important. Terribly important, he said. Perhaps he knew who—who Bentfinger was. Perhaps he was going to tell! And it's Bentfinger who killed him. Bentfinger! Right here in this saloon! Bentfinger—"

Everybody yelled, then. The Phillipots woman, just balanced on her feet, went down for the third time. The Scotch officer glared at the jammed gun which had come from my pocket; and the dark-faced Gorn suddenly stepped out of line, tossed on the checkered cloth the typed card, snarling:

"There it is. There's the name. A typed card. And the captain drilled through the temple. The devil is among us—"

"*That girl!*" The missionary, Norwood, was pointing a shaky hand. "Where did *she* come from? She's been on the boat with the rest of us since we left Bombay." His voice quavered to a high key. "That Bentfinger murder was in Bombay the night this boat sailed. You remember the papers? It might have been a woman! And you remember? There was a murder in Cairo when our ship was there—"

"*Ja!*" De Stroon's gold teeth glowed. "And when we were laid up on this devil's craft in Marseilles there was also a slaying. Pearls were stolen from a hotel. So. You recall, Herr Major, the papers? You were on the boat, too, Herr Blair. And it was Dr. Smartbeck, *ja*, who came up the gangway just as we sailed, with the dreadful news and terror-stricken because he had stayed that day in the Grand Hôtel! And so when we were in London and Marseilles and Cairo and Bombay, there were these Bentfinger killings! *Ja!* But this girl came on that night at Bombay and hid in her cabin—it was next to mine—and I heard her bribe the steward to tell nobody she was aboard until we were out at sea—"

"And I," snarled Phillipots, "heard her quarreling with the captain tonight. I'd stepped on deck for a breath of air. Even in the rain it's better on deck than inside this hell-ship. There was a light in the skipper's cabin. They were quarreling, I tell you. Distinctly I heard this woman's voice. Then I came down to the saloon and she turned up a few minutes later; looked all upset."

A WRY smile twisted across the lips of the silk buyer, Gorn. His black eyes fixed on the girl.

"So you *were* in that hotel ballroom in Bombay, Miss Brown." His words clipped out short, metallic. "I thought I saw you there that night. I passed the door just after the murders in the garden and saw you dodging away to a motor on the avenue. I came aboard the Arcturus at Bombay, too. And I asked you in the smoking room that night if you'd been at the *talookdar's* ball and you denied it. But you can't deny that you ran past my cabin door in soaking wet clothes, drenched from

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head to toe, about the time this man Benson says this cloaked assassin—and *you* had on a cloak—boarded this ship. You weren't to be seen around at sailing time. I know because I looked for you—"

"But none of us were around then, Gorn," Blair interrupted. "When the Arcturus cleared Pahang it was pouring rain, and—"

And then the girl's hands were down from her face, and she was staring. Staring at us, wide-eyed. Her cheeks the color of snow. Dark hair gleaming against a forehead drawn with pain. Bravely she faced the row of passengers, the commanding Scotchman with the massive gun, the crowding sailors on guard. Her voice was so low it could scarcely be heard above the creak of the swinging ship and far-away grinding of engines.

"I would give my life to find the—the one who killed Captain Lane," she said quietly. "I did not do it. Captain Lane was my father—"

"Good God!" The exclamation came from Blair. The young British planter seemed the only one left of us with any wits about him. Sympathy in his face, he stepped toward the girl, reaching to take her by the hand. In crossing the floor he kicked something that had been lying in shadow under his chair. The object slithered into view; lay limp on the floor at my very feet. It had been lying under Blair's chair, you understand, and by accident he kicked it into light. A glove, it was. A floppy, large-size, yellow cotton glove. A glove to match the one I'd picked up in that Pahang alley and given to Captain Lane.

I stared at the thing in horror. The Scotch mate barked a sharp oath. Stooping quickly, he grabbed up the yellow glove and tossed it on the table. "It was under your chair, Blair," he snarled harshly. "Stand back, there, and put up your hands—"

"Righto." Blair stepped against the table with hands aloft. I saw him glare at the glove, intently. Then he turned on First Mate Hague, stern-mouthed.

"I'm afraid you've forced me to it," he declared grimly. "And I'm beginning to take some stock in this fellow Benson's story. I've got a few things to go on, now. Didn't want to show anything till I did have. But you'll find the papers in my pocket, Hague. *Captain* Hague, it is from now on, I suppose. Well, you've done very well so far, Captain Hague. Put up your gun and I'll take over the job from now on. My name's Blair, but I'm not a planter. The notes in my pocket will tell you who I am. I'm from Scotland Yard."

CHAPTER IV.

LITTLE WHITE LIES!

WE sat—a grotesque group of passengers, I can tell you—in the smoking room; and I, for one, was relieved. I was relieved to get out of that dining saloon, and relieved to see among us a man who could flourish the credentials of Scotland Yard.

"You'd best get busy running the ship," Inspector Blair had instructed the Scotch first officer. "I'll handle the murder investigation. Send a hand down to the engineer and try to find if some one below threw that lighting system out of gear. Get a line on our radio operator, too. We've got to try and repair those wireless instruments. I'm afraid I should have jumped on the case at the start. But I didn't want it

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known there was a headquarters man aboard at first. Wanted to let everybody talk and act freely."

He turned on the passengers. "You're all under arrest. Every one on this ship is under arrest. But you who were here in the saloon when Captain Lane was shot will have special attention. I'm certain that shot came from the table. Then the gun was flung through that open port. Bentfinger and one of you are one and the same. I'm going to get you, Bentfinger. Before God, I'm going to. Captain Hague, we'll march these people into the smoking room. I want a steward to search their cabins for arms. I'll talk to these suspects right now—"

He stood in the smoking room door, facing us. The smoking room of the Arcturus was dreary; a scatter of hard-backed funereal chairs, a bare table showing wine-stains, a loud-creaking floor, a wall dull with two pictures of sailing ships, a card of lifeboat instructions, a photograph of the Sleeping Buddha of Hakai. Brass gaboons jangling against a bench and a decaying rubber plant flopping limp in a corner. But the smoking room was on the deck above the dining saloon—not quite far enough above to be Paradise, yet a vast lungful of improvement just the same.

It was hard to believe, once away from that fatal dining saloon, that any murder had happened. It was harder to believe that one of the number about me was the terrible assassin whose name meant a scourge in ports half around the world. Harder still to believe that the face of the demon I had chased across Pahang could have been owned by one of these passengers.

De Stroon with his gold teeth? And yet the lips in the face of the assassin had been sucked in—perhaps to hide such betraying marks. The Reverend Norwood with his long flat cheeks and blue nose and wry mouth? Major Phillipots with his red jowls? Bulgy Mrs. Phillipots with the moons stained under her eyes? The pale, gray-eyed girl? The fuzzy-wigged, chittering Dr. Smartbeck? Gorn, swarthy and somber and narrow-eyed?

But the light from that damned Chinese lantern had been dismally bad. My whole brain had focused on those ghastly yellow hands. I was forced to confess that I could no more recall the exact look of that demonlike assassin-face than I could recall the details of a nightmare; and I glared at the group about me in mounting apprehension. The assassin might have been anybody. And evidence proved it was one of them. The hair kept rising on my head at the question: "Which one?"

IF you think the little grouping in the smoking room was a festive meeting you are wrong. My fellow passengers (but one of them was surely faking) were every bit as wild-brained as I was. Major Phillipots blustered, glared, made fists and threats.

"So one of you is this bloody killer, eh? Well, I'm watching all of yuh! Keep an eye on these birds, inspector! I'd feel better if I could have my gun—"

De Stroon wiped his face and lapsed into a chatter of Dutch while his eyes never stopped a scared roving.

Mrs. Phillipots sat on the edge of her chair, panting. "If you keep me here one more minute I shall scream. I'll faint. I'll die. I've a bad heart, and I can't stand this. Not another minute—"

The missionary was sunk in his chair like an empty suit of clothes, frightened to a faint whispering.

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The girl (she sat next to me, and suddenly, out of all my mental rioting, I was conscious of lovely brown hair) was quiet, marble-white, twisting a bit of lace in pale fingers.

Dr. Ernest Wonger Smartbeck told who he was at least forty times in the voice of a piccolo, bit his fingers, announced he expected to be shot to sponge any minute, and called on Heaven, Inspector Blair, the United States and Aristotle to save an innocent man from undeserved death.

Gorn sat back in his chair and studied the room through narrowed eyelids.

Blair sponged his face with a handkerchief. "None of you are going to be shot. There's not a gun among you and our new captain is behind me, armed and ready to kill at a sign of alarm. One of you before me is a killer. I'm not fool enough to expect an easy discovery of that one. Bentfinger. Well, Bentfinger, whoever you are I've got you right here.

"You, Norwood, De Stroon, Major and Mrs. Phillipots, and Smartbeck, you've been on the Arcturus ever since it left London River. So have I. The Arcturus made port in Marseilles, Cairo and Bombay. In Marseilles, Cairo and Bombay this Bentfinger played red-handed while the Arcturus lay loading in the harbor. I, a Scotland Yard operator detailed to watch another party on this ship, made no connection between the Bentfinger case and the itinerary of the Arcturus. Headquarters hadn't assigned me that case—yet.

"I was only to stay on this tramp steamer until we made Shanghai. But I was not too unawake to the curious coincidence of the Arcturus leaving port on the day this Bentfinger had struck that same port. In Bombay, you, Miss Brown, and you, Gorn, came aboard. You, Benson, boarded us in Pahang. Your extraordinary story will bear inspection. Close inspection. Yet—I received a cable from London when we docked in Pahang this morning. A cable that set me on the Bentfinger case. Scotland Yard had now decided that the killer was aboard this ship. I'm now certain that Bentfinger sat with us at the table to-night when Captain Lane came to tell a secret that would have betrayed the assassin. Whoever you are, Bentfinger, you worked well. I'll get you—and I'll get you to-night—"

"THREATS!" An unexpected sneer came from Gorn. "You can't bullyrag us this way, Blair, until you establish the right authority. You've arrested us here without any warrants. We're all under his majesty the—"

"See for yourself, Mr. Gorn," Blair said evenly, extending a sheaf of documents. "Scotland Yard needs no warrant in this case—"

The silk buyer glared at the papers. I thought I caught a most curious expression on his face—an expression I was, later, to remember. "Full authority, all right," Gorn muttered. "There's the seal of headquarters. Cabled authority from chief inspector to Inspector Blair. But— All right, you can do as you please with the lot of us."

"You seem," Blair snapped, "to know something of Scotland Yard, Mr. Gorn. I gave you a look at my papers to see if you did."

"I had business with the Yard once before," Gorn countered quietly. "Business in Tokio. I—"

"What business did you have in Bombay, the day of the Bentfinger murders there, Mr. Gorn?"

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"The business of waiting for a cheap passage to Japan," Gorn growled. "I'd spent a week there. Lived at Crown Hotel. My home is in England. Bedford, England. I'm a silk buyer for Hilton and Curtis, Ltd."

"Hilton and Curtis of London? Good. Then, of course, you'll have letters, papers, something to identify your affiliation with them?" Blair drew from his pocket a little blue leather notebook and jotted an item. "Can you show something of that order? And your passport?"

"Naturally. There are some letters on the shelf in my cabin." Gorn fumbled in his coat. "My passport—"

Blair glanced over the little booklet bearing the seal of Great Britain; returned it with a cheerless smile. "You were in Bombay the night of the killing by Bentfinger. Below in the saloon you told Miss Brown you'd seen her at the ball in the Asian Queen Hotel. What were you doing in that vicinity?"

Gorn moved in his chair. "An affair like that would be of local interest, wouldn't it? I saw the crowd in the hotel foyer, and hung about. Curiosity. Might see some of the celebrities. All the big bugs were supposed to be there. I was standing around looking on when this girl, here, came hustling through the crowd. She had such a—a sort of frightened expression on her face I was curious. Minute later the word got around of the murder on the terrace. The place was in an infernal uproar, and I got down to the Bund. I'd booked passage on the Arcturus that same morning. But my letters will tell who I am, all right—"

Blair seemed to be satisfied. I thought an expression of relief crossed his face. He scribbled in his book a moment; turned on the officer behind him. "Mr. Hague, will you please go to Mr. Gorn's cabin and look for the letters on the shelf? Righto. One thing more, Mr. Gorn. Bentfinger struck in Cairo, Marseilles, London. And first in New York, America. Can you have been in those cities during those episodes?"

Gorn nodded approvingly. "I was waiting for that. Of course my alibi's established. I've never been in those cities, Mr. Blair. I sailed straight from London to Bombay on the Chelidra."

BLAIR swung on De Stroon. "Jan De Stroon, you're on the books as a planter bound for Shanghai. You've been with us on this craft ever since she left London. Of course you went ashore in Marseilles when we were held up there. Cairo and Bombay and Pahang, too. Unhappily for me this whole crowd who sailed out of London seems to have gone ashore at those fatal ports. But were you in New York at the time of the Bentfinger diamond robberies?"

"No!" De Stroon wiped his face and gurgled. "I haff never been in New York City, Herr Inspector—"

"When in the States you lived in Baltimore?"

"*Ja.* And when I sail to England I sail from Baltimore, and—"

"You're lying, De Stroon," Blair asserted icily. "Our first night out from London I overheard you, right here in this smoking room, tell Major Phillipots you'd sailed from America on the Atlantic Transport liner, Minnekhada. Permit me to remind you that the Minnekhada is famous for making its slow run only between New York and London. So you *have* been in New York."

"Only for one day," De Stroon blurted desperately. "I was—"

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"Herr De Stroon, your record for truth-telling is shaky. I want facts. Now, then, one night at dinner on the Red Sea did you not show Captain Lane a medal you'd won some years before in the Dutch Colonial army? Yes. A medal for sharpshooting, it was. A medal for winning a pistol-shooting championship. You are, then, a crack pistol shot, De Stroon. And the man who shot Captain Lane through the temple to-night, the killer who slays always with a bullet through the temple, is a master marksman, too." His eyes were steel points, stabbing the Dutchman. "I'm noting these facts, De Stroon—"

"I'm no assassin!" the Dutchman yelled. "With this devil's affair I haff nothing to do—"

"That," growled Blair sternly, "remains to be seen. Major Phillipots, it would be better if *you* told the strict truth. You showed me your passport once before. You're returning to join a Shanghai regiment after a year's leave, I believe. I take it you're no bungler with weapons. Now you and your wife were ashore in all the ports under suspicion, save, perhaps, New York. Tell me, major, did you and your wife chance to travel in America during this year of leave?"

The army officer stiffened in his chair; played at his collar with nervous fingers. "In—in New York? Why, no. The wi— Mrs. Phillipots and me, sir, can prove our innocence easily. You're wasting your time on us, sir. Ridiculous to believe me—or her—capable of being criminals. I've been in the colonial service for twenty years. My record, sir—"

"Can be easily established," Blair admitted. "But every one who sat at that dining table is under suspicion, major. But then, of course, if you've never been in New York that lets you out of it. Mrs. Phillipots, you back your husband up in these statements?"

Mrs. Phillipots appeared capable of backing her husband up in nothing. Hands on her stormy and voluminous bosom, she strangled out a stream of words calculated to assure the world that her husband, though nothing to brag about, was not quite an assassin, and that she, herself, was the acme of respectability, though God knew she'd be in a madhouse if the killer in their midst wasn't captured within five minutes. Just as she was ending her plea with a histrionic account of her ailing nervous system, Dr. Smartbeck jumped out of his chair.

"THAT man!" he shrieked, pointing at Major Phillipots. "I've been trying all along to remember. Listen. Our boat lay in at Alexandria and everybody spent the week in Cairo. The very day of our sailing—that afternoon—the Bentfinger murders—my God, there were four people slain!—took place. The ship sailed at midnight. I was near the gangway. All the passengers were in the smoking room talking about the murder. All but that major, there. He was not yet aboard. Just as they drew up the gangway he came aboard ship. It was dark, but I saw his face. There was a red smear on his right cheek. It looked like blood. He hurried down the deck brushing it away. It *was* blood—fresh blood—" Dr. Smartbeck shrilled in excitement. "I remember, now. Blood—"

The major shot to his feet. The major's wife slithered out of her chair and bumped the floor with a thud. "Let her lie," the army officer snorted ungraciously. "She'll be throwing faints all over the place. Besides, she needn't

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hear what I've got to say. In the first place this fuzzy-haired professor is a blithering jackass. Look here, it's nobody's damned business and I won't go into it. But this fool of a Soviet spy or whatever he is with his piano-player's wig happened to see rouge on my cheek. Lip rouge. There was a—a lady—a friend of mine came down to see me off. And as for you, Smartbeck, didn't *you* stay at the Grand Hôtel in Marseilles? The very place where Bentfinger killed that French official's wife and stole her string of black pearls? I don't think," the major sat down with a snort, "you'd have nerve to stick a pin in a wax dummy. But you never can tell," he added savagely.

"But I have never been in New York or fired a gun in my life," the learned one screeched, imploring hands stretched toward Blair. "I'm Doctor Ernest Wonger Smartbeck, of the Philosophy Department at Williams College. Taking a sabbatical year for my health. I wanted a slow boat to tour the world on. I'm to study the oriental philosophers in their pristine environment and I'm writing my last volume on the theory of cognition. I'm an epistemologist: study the grounds for the validity of—"

"Great Lord!" Major Phillipots snarled. "Must we hear all that again?"

"Study the validity of human knowledge," Dr. Smartbeck went on. "I'm writing my book with Professor Burl of Columbia University. Many an hour I've spent with the famous professor who wrote the only answer to Kant's—"

"You've worked in coöperation with the Columbia philosopher?" Blair snapped. "Spent hours with him—"

"And all you'll have to do to absolutely establish my identity," Dr. Smartbeck declared with a triumphant gesture, "is cable him. I was well along in my work, too, until that dreadful murder in the Grand Hôtel. I haven't been able to concentrate since. Fearful. Was just leaving the hotel when the ghastly alarm was given, and—"

"And you've never been in New York," Blair clipped out, "yet you've spent hours at Columbia University, there, with a famous professor. One lie hints at a whole framework of them, Dr. Smartbeck. From now on I'll believe nothing of you save the fact that you *might* be a dead pistol shot, a connoisseur of precious gems and an artist at fabrication." He wrote at length in his notebook, while Dr. Smartbeck wriggled and sweated on the edge of his seat, gasping: "But Professor Burl came up to Williamstown—"

MEANTIME Norwood and Major Phillipots had propped Mrs. Phillipots once more in her chair. She was thanking Norwood with feeble nods when Blair called on the missionary.

"You've been in New York City, Norwood?"

"I sailed from there," he said in a toneless voice. "My home in the States is Elkhart, Indiana. I am sent to China by the Free Methodist Church, my dear sir. Here is a testament presented to me by the Lovers of the Lord Society of Elkhart—a fine, upstanding group of ladies they are, too—on the eve of my departure." He drew from his pocket the little book. "It will serve to identify me in place of the passport which I can't seem to find anywhere in my—"

"You've lost your passport?"

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"I fear so, inspector. Just yesterday when we were docked in Pahang I looked for it and it was gone. Misplaced, no doubt—"

"Tell me," Blair interjected. "How does it happen a missionary is seen loading a revolver in his cabin? Back in the dining saloon, De Stroon mentioned the fact that he had seen you servicing your gun." The Englishman motioned with a hand. "You denied that you owned such a gun."

"But I *saw* it!" De Stroon announced firmly.

The Reverend Norwood twisted in his chair with a passionate grimace. Then he controlled himself with a visible effort. A pious smile replaced the snarl that had started on his lips. "You are mistaken, my dear man. I cannot imagine what you saw. But your eyes deceived you. I carry—or carried—no weapon. I am a man of peace. Come to heal the souls of countless heathen, to carry a message—"

"But," Blair interrupted with a show of annoyance, "if you had no passport, how did you pass the customs and shore officials at Pahang while the Arcturus lay at dock?"

"Praise the Lord, there is my alibi," the missionary intoned. "I was not ashore in Pahang, neither was I ashore in Bombay where the fiendish murder of the rajah took place. I stayed on the Arcturus. The very hour when the people were slain in Bombay, the very hour when this assassin dealt death in Pahang, I, of all these other passengers, was on board ship. The others were somewhere ashore. I stayed aboard."

"You remained on the Arcturus? Did any one see you aboard during those times, my man?"

Norwood looked about him with a self-satisfied smile that was almost a leer on his theological face. "Exactly. I spent the whole time talking with Mr. Dunlop, the ship's radio operator."

"And," Blair's voice grated, "insomuch as the ship's radio operator has totally disappeared it would seem there is no way of checking your statement." The Englishman sighed. "It's your turn, Miss Brown," he continued in a kindly tone. "I'm sorry. This dreadful affair has worn all of us to a beastly state. It's late. I'll hurry this up so we can go. I'm frightfully sorry to have to question you, but I'm afraid you're in this, too. At—in the saloon, below, you said Captain Lane was your father. Please explain that statement, and tell me all you can about yourself."

CHAPTER V.

A PREMONITION.

NOW all of us stared at the girl. She took a deep breath, looked straight at the man before her, and began in a level voice: "Captain Lane was my foster-father. My own parents were Americans. My father was in the embassy at London; died there before I was born. I was born on the boat when my mother was returning to her home in New York. My mother died at my birth. Captain Lane, then first officer of the ship, adopted me. I kept the name, Hope Brown—the name I was to have had. And Captain Lane was the only parent I ever knew. He—he was splendid to me; put me through school in New York. Sometimes I traveled with him. On White Star and Anchor Line ships. Then—about a year ago—he went with the Champion Line.

"He made several South American runs as master of this boat. Then he sailed her to London. I think he'd ex-

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pected to bring her right back from London, but he cabled me that the ship had been commissioned for a run to the Far East. From a letter I judged that something was not quite right. He seemed uneasy about something. Then I got a letter postmarked Marseilles. It sounded unhappy and—and queer, somehow. He didn't like the boat. He didn't want to go on. It would probably be his last voyage."

The girl shook her head. "It wasn't like father to write that way. I—I was frightened and cabled him that I'd catch him in Cairo if I could. He told me not to try. I caught a fast boat to England, and the Champion offices, there, told me I might catch the Arcturus as it had been tied up in Marseilles with engine trouble.

"In Marseilles I learned the ship had cleared a week before for Egypt, and I managed to get a fast mail boat to Cairo. The Arcturus had just cleared for Bombay. I got passage on a P. and O. liner to Bombay, and my boat passed the Arcturus a few miles out of Suez. I beat the Arcturus to Bombay by three days, and there was a—a man on my ship. A British official. He—he was pleasant company and we—spent some time together. When we got to Bombay he showed me about the town, we went to dinner at several clubs, and he asked me to the *talookdar's* ball at the Asian Queen Hotel.

"I consented to go. Just an hour before he came to take me I learned the Arcturus had been in port several days. I rushed down to the tourist agency in my hotel, booked passage on father's ship, ordered my things made ready. And at the same time I overheard some people in the lobby mention the name of my British friend. And they spoke of his *wife*. I didn't know he had been married. I scarcely knew what to do. But I went to the ball with him, expecting to leave early and give my sudden sailing as an excuse. You see, he had been—been awfully attentive to me before, and—but I went to the party with him.

"He—during the party he asked me to marry him. He was leaving for North India the next morning and asked me to go with him as his wife. It was—dreadful. I was on the point of demanding an explanation when the terrible—the terrible news of the killing on the terrace threw the ball into—into tragedy. He—the man I was with—was a high official. I knew there would be a police investigation. I fled away. It was the only thing I could do. My name—his wife's name—the papers and all."

IT was no time for such a performance, but I remember that I damned the name of this girl's British "friend" not quite under my breath, and suddenly found I had reached over to press her hand.

"Just two more points, Miss Brown," Blair persisted gently. "You were heard—well, heard talking heatedly with Captain Lane some minutes in his cabin to-night before the—the captain was killed. Your father was—"

"I'd hoped to surprise him," the girl explained brokenly. "He didn't know I was on his boat for several days, you see, after it left Bombay. When I finally went on the bridge to see him he was very angry. He was even more alarmed when I told him about—about Bombay. He seemed terribly frightened, too. And all the time he did not seem himself. I had an impression something was on his mind.

"He told me his nerves had been troubling him. He said this was the

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worst ship he'd ever sailed and that I'd have to leave her when we got to Shanghai. This evening when I went to his cabin we talked things over. He reproved me severely. Poor father!" She put her handkerchief to her eyes. "I'm certain, now, he had a premonition—"

Blair studied his blue notebook thoughtfully. He looked, suddenly, very tired. "Captain Lane, your father, told you he didn't like this ship. Did he tell you why? Did he say anything about any of the passengers?" He fixed a steady gaze on the girl. "Try to remember."

She shook her head hopelessly. "He just said he disliked the boat. That was all. And that I'd have to leave at Shanghai and go back home."

"And last of all," Blair reminded her, "about your rushing to your cabin soaking wet when we cleared Pahang. Gorn, I believe, claimed he saw you. And you wore a cape."

"I'd been standing by myself on the bow," she whispered. "Alone. It was raining very hard."

The Englishman sighed heavily, delved into a pocket and produced the yellow cotton glove. "Have any of you, besides Mr. Benson, seen a glove like this before?"

They shook their heads. He wrote in his notebook, and turned on me. "You're the key man in this little party, Benson," he promised me. "I suppose you weren't carrying a passport when you started on your evening stroll to-night. But you may have something on you to establish your connection with the consulate at Pahang."

I showed three letters and a pawn ticket. He smiled. "I'm glad to see you are corresponding with people in Los Angeles. Your home?"

"Yes," I was glad to say. "And I sailed the Pacific to get here, thank God."

"This French sailor you saw killed on the Pahang water front. He said one word to you and that was all. 'Bentfinger.'"

"And that was enough," I protested. Blair nodded; writing.

"And then you caught sight of the killer's face. According to your story, you won just a brief glimpse. Now then. Study the faces of those about you." He spaced his words for emphasis. "Could one of them have been the face you saw?"

THE Scotland Yard man had never taken his eyes from the one he was interrogating. Now he watched me with the gaze of a hawk. Beads of sweat started afresh on my forehead. Unhappily I turned about in my chair and studied the faces grouped about me. Lord knows, I'd been doing nothing else since coming aboard ship. I peered like a halfwit, and, as my glance rested on Mrs. Phillipots she made a sudden and astonishing bounce to her feet.

"This is ridiculous!" she screamed. "This Mr. Benson and his insane story. I'll go mad. How can any of us believe such a story? He says he saw this terrible assassin's face. Yet, he can't tell what kind of a face it was. The face of a woman, even, he says. Do you think I'm going to be stared at like that? Let me go. I'll die. I'm a nervous woman, sick, tortured. I'm going straight to my cabin!"

"Please, then," Blair nodded. "You may leave. We'll all go in a moment." Mrs. Phillipots flounced from the room with a gush of sobs. "Don't try to leave the corridor," Blair warned her. "For your own safety, you know. Be-

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sides, the sailors on guard are forbidden to let any one pass as yet. Your husband will be with you straightaway."

Her door slammed like a bomb. "Inspector," I groaned. "I can't possibly say it was any one here. I recognize no resemblance. Yet it *might* have been anybody."

"It was somebody, all right," he declared savagely. "Somebody in that dining saloon. Somebody who tossed that yellow glove under my chair. Somebody who put out those lights, fired lightning-fast with a master eye, tossed the incriminating gun through that port. Somebody who has traveled from America to this spot on the China Seas. Somebody who kills with a laugh; killed Captain Lane, that French seaman, those people in Bombay, Cairo, Marseilles, London. But the start was New York."

He swept the room with an eye that seemed to, falling on me, see straight through my head. "Mr. Benson seems to have an alibi. You, Phillipots, and your wife have never been in America to start with. Your alibi will be good, too. Norwood, you claim yourself a missionary who never carried a gun. That will clear you, if true. And Gorn, you let yourself out at the start if your claim that you've not made the ports along the way holds out. That will leave only you, Miss Brown, and I believe you can clear yourself easily. You, Dr. Smartbeck. And you, De Stroon. But when our wireless is working again I can very easily check up on all of you—"

A sailor stepped through the doorway. "The radio, sir, is pretty hopeless. Can't possibly repair it until to-morrow."

Blair gave a gesture of resignation. "Work hard at it, then."

The cockney steward with the big nose appeared on the seaman's heels. "I've 'unted over the cabins, sir, like you ordered. 'Ere's the weapons as I found. This Webley pistol from Major Phillipots's cabin first off, sir. This 'ere 'orse pistol from the luggage of Dr. Smartbeck there, sir—"

"It's a curio!" Dr. Smartbeck howled.

The steward went on blandly, holding up a little pearl-handled .22 Colt. "This from Miss Brown's 'andbag, sir. I'm sorry, Miss Brown. 'Ere's a Belgian automatic from Mr. De Stroon's shelf, sir. An' I didn't find nothing like a gun in Mr. Gorn's cabin. No guns there, sir. But lastly, in the pocket of a Burberry cape 'angin' on the door of Missionary Norwood's cabin, sir, I discovered this 'ere Haenel automatic, sir."

MISSIONARY NORWOOD went livid. Blair gave him a thin smile. "So you were armed after all, Reverend Norwood. A lie in your bonnet, too. Lies have a way of coming to the surface even when clerics tell them. Your lie puts you down with the others who try to obstruct justice. Apparently Miss Brown, Major and Mrs. Phillipots and Mr. Gorn are the only ones who haven't troubled to invent fake alibis, and—"

Andrew Hague's Scotch face appeared in the doorway. "I've talked with the chief engineer and the ship's carpenter, Inspector Blair. They've been going over the ship's lighting plant. Can't imagine how those lights were doused. They claim those lights could only be turned out by throwing a switch in the engine room. Nobody below threw that switch. No fuses blown anywhere either. They can't understand it. And here's those letters you

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wanted from Mr. Gorn's cabin." He held out a packet of envelopes; frowned at the smoking room. "Hurry it up, inspector."

Blair took the sheaf of letters, his eye on the first officer. "Look here, Mr. Hague," he queried. "You were standing in the saloon door when Captain Lane was shot. You had your eye on the whole scene. For perhaps four seconds that room was black as pitch. There was the shot. Just a flash in the dark. Uproar, and then the beastly lights came back on. Now the second the lights went out, all of us sprang to our feet. The killer, no doubt, leaned far down the table—over the table and *away* from the position of his (or her) chair, you understand. Of course, when there's a flash in the dark like that you're blinded and stunned and can't seem to tell where it came from, anyway. The lights flooding on as they did blinded every one, again.

"But Captain Lane, who was looking down the *length* of the table, was struck square in the forehead. Not a glancing shot. Now the open porthole was behind the captain's head. That means that the killer had a straight throw for his gun. A mighty good throwing-eye needed to pitch that gun through that hole in the dark, yes? Even if that shot had come from the saloon doorway—and the flash was somewhere *over* the table — that gun couldn't have been flung halfway across the saloon and sped out through that open port. This seems to exonerate you, Mr. Hague. You stood in the doorway while those lights were out, didn't you?"

"I never moved."

"And if you had leaped across the room, fired as you reached over the table, flung the gun through the port (impossible to do with such speed and accuracy) and sprung back to your place on the threshold, your feet moving across the floor would have been heard. I only explain this to relieve the minds of the innocent members of this group who may have wondered if you, yourself, could be the assassin. I also wanted to know if you stood the whole time right there in the doorway."

"I stood right there, inspector. Stunned, I suppose. When the lights came on and I saw the captain dead I—only then could I reach for my gun. Of course the flash seemed to come—well—it looked to me like it had come from the end of the table nearest Captain Lane. Tell you the truth, I thought Miss Brown or the man next to her had fired that shot."

"A final point. You stood in the doorway. Suppose some one with incredible celerity had darted into the saloon from outside. This is beyond all possibility, but the whole case is—is impossible. But could such a one have got past you where you stood? You're a large man, Mr. Hague, but—"

"Impossible!" The big Scotchman was emphatic. "Nobody ran past me into that saloon and out again in those three seconds. Nobody went by me at all. I'd have felt it, all right. Captain Lane was shot by somebody right there at that table!"

BLAIR nodded. "I'm only forestalling some of the more agile minds in this group. I've been waiting for that wild theory to be advanced, and I wanted to save time. Now, then, Mr. Gorn, I'll look at your mail, here, and then we're through for a bit." He shuffled the envelopes in his fingers, opened several, studied the contents. "Business of buying silk for Hilton and Curtis, Ltd., all right," he

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conceded. "And your Bedford address I'm glad to note. Hello, what's this?"

A little pink ticket had dropped from the batch of papers. I heard a sharp oath crackle from Gorn's lips. Blair grabbed up the stub of cardboard from the smoking room floor; glared. "A ticket on the P. L. and M. Railroad of France. Paris to Saint Raphael, first class. Why, Saint Raphael is the town where that French government official's wife was going to wear her black pearls to Count Fallicet's ball. This ticket is dated April first. And that woman was slain late in April and this ticket is good for a thirty-day stopover in Marseilles. So you *were* on the Continent, p e r h a p s in Marseilles—"

Gorn shrugged. "You haven't done badly so far, inspector," he offered cryptically. "Don't switch off the main track."

For a moment I thought Blair would smite that bland, dark face. Then he scribbled angrily in his blue notebook. "Another liar," he scathed. "And the easy conscience need not lie, remember. All right. Steward, take these guns and lock them up in my cabin.

"Now, then," he waved at us, "you may all go to your cabins. Observe, please, the guards stationed at each end of the corridor. Those guards are instructed to let nobody pass; to challenge any who attempt to leave a cabin; to shoot at sight on any untoward move by any of you. You are all disarmed, which means Bentfinger's front teeth are drawn. In a few hours the wireless will be repaired, I can radio to shore and verify every move made by any of you. Please pass before me into the corridor."

We filed out of the smoking room in a silence laid by staggered nerves and back-breaking fatigue. Blair assigned me the vacant cabin next to his at the corridor's forward end. I heard six bells go somewhere up on deck. Two o'clock. The tolling was inexplicably mournful. For the first time I noticed how the ship was rolling. Water thudded sullenly to the faint sound of a blowing gale; and the deck underfoot was palsied as the ship's screw reared, whirring, for a brief lift clear of the sea. The corridor was full of wind.

I believe the "good-night" Blair and I offered the girl as she stepped through her cabin door was the only bit of etiquette observed on the adjournment of our night's inquisition. She gave a smile in reply that was well worth an effort on our part. The Englishman looked cheered for the first time in the past three hours. I told myself that this poor devil from Scotland Yard was up against a case all the masters of detection in the world could not have solved. The finger of suspicion pointed at every one of those Arcturus passengers who had sat at that fatal table for a fatal evening "snack." Only Major and Mrs. Phillipots seemed, so far, to have established any sort of alibi that was strong—the alibi of not having been in New York.

THEN Major Phillipots banged open the door of the Phillipots cabin, gave a scowl for the rest of us in the corridor, and stepped inside; and without warning, Blair stepped in after him. Mrs. Phillipots was to be seen at an open port-hole. She spun about with a hysterical screech, saw the man behind her husband, and promptly plunged floorward in a heap of beads and cloth. Stooping

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quickly, Blair grasped her by the wrist. Her hand was closed to a fist. Blair carefully opened the fingers. Bits of colored, glazed paper scattered about.

"Where's your luggage kit? Your bags!" Blair's voice sawed with anger; his eyes impaling the major against a wall. "Your luggage!"

Major Phillipots was green about the jowls. "Right," he gasped thickly. "You don't need to look. The fool had to bungle it. She soaked 'em off the luggage, all right. That's it, inspector. They're baggage posters. She had to paste 'em all over her kit so the blighters in Shanghai could see we'd really stayed at the Astor Hotel on Times Square." He scowled in fury at the offending shards of paper. "Yes. We were in New York. And," defiantly, "we left the very day of the Bentfinger robberies, if you want to know. Now, damn it all, sir, what the devil can you do about that?"

"Remember it," said Blair softly.

And at last I was alone in my cabin. At last I had my shoes off and the door bolted against fear and my weary bones flat on a bed. Faces and facts marched and countermarched across my humming brain. Bentfinger, the killer who might be either woman or man, master-marksman, jewel thief, cobra-brained, deadly. No clew to the killer but his trail. New York, London, Marseilles, Cairo, Bombay, Pahang, this hell-spot on the South China Sea. Major and Mrs. Phillipots had followed that trail—so had all the others, perhaps, save Gorn.

Had Gorn even been in New York? He claimed to the contrary. But he had lied about being in Marseilles—he could lie about being in New York. The girl had followed the trail. Late. But, perhaps, at the very same time. The Phillipotses, Gorn, Norwood, De Stroon, Dr. Smartbeck had lied. Perhaps the girl lied, too. She had been at the *talookdar's* ball when the murder took place there in Bombay.

Gorn had been there. Had Gorn been in Marseilles? Dr. Smartbeck had stayed in the Grand Hôtel in Marseilles—the very house in which the French woman had been slain. De Stroon owned a sharpshooter's medal. Norwood owned a sharpshooter's pistol and could produce no passport. Major Phillipots had dashed up the gangway in Cairo with a red smear on his cheek. Had it really been rouge? And Mrs. Phillipots had not allowed me to scrutinize her face closely. Always fainting. A stall of some kind? The girl— That girl had told no lie.

I sat up to throw off my coat. Certainly Bentfinger had been in that dining saloon. The yellow glove. But then I could only think of dark hair shaping a finely molded head, clear gray eyes brave in the sight of tragedy (what if she *had* worn a wet cape out of Pahang?) and a certain arched chin not given to quivering. Hope. That was her name. Hope. Thank heaven I could quiet down at long last.

May I state here and now that I thanked the good Lord entirely too soon? Sighing, I stretched out on the bunk. Next instant I was sitting bolt upright, sweat flooding from every chilled pore. A cry had ripped out of the night. A frantic and terrible cry.

CHAPTER VI.

SOMEBODY WILL DIE!

"FIRE!" The cry stung through the door of my cabin, and was echoed by a bedlam to raise the hair on a mummy. Bells clanged. Feet pounded the deck outside. A confusion

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of yells was drowned by the wild blast of the steamer's siren.

"Fire!" No lullaby, believe you me! And no peaceful incense was the coiling rope of smoke that curled from under my cabin door and eddied along the wall. Wow! I got off my bunk as if I'd been shot, yanked open the door and slammed full tilt into a marionette in a flannel nightgown. Both of us rolled in a tangle across the corridor and I came upright on top of Dr. Smartbeck.

Dr. Smartbeck had hung a nightgown over his clothing, and he seemed in a desperate hurry to get somewhere. So was I. He shrieked in my face and I hauled him to his feet. Something fell from his clawing hand; and I was never to forget that the object was a little box of safety matches.

Smoke wreathed thick in the corridor, and its narrow confines were experiencing a stampede that would have rivalled a charge in a madhouse. Mrs. Phillipots, fully clothed, was able to lead the din, and she wasn't finding time to swoon in that rush.

Major Phillipots, shirtless and barefoot, bawled and elbowed. De Stroon came out of his cabin like a tornado, hung with lifebelts. I caught a glimpse of Norwood, naked to the waist in the middle of the whirl, and noticed something odd about the missionary. Something so strange that I couldn't fathom what it was until, later, I was told.

Gorn was there, too, calmest of all in the face of threatened panic. I saw him start for the closed door of the girl's cabin; but I was there before him. We banged on the panels, and the door sprung open to reveal the girl in a poppy-colored dressing robe that I'd have remembered through hell and high water.

Somehow her hand seemed to fit in mine, and together we followed the race for the open deck, darting side by side through the smoke and uproar with Gorn somewhere behind us and the rest of the passenger list whooping up ahead. Chill salted air whipped at us as we floundered across open deck in a blind rush for safety, stumbling like a crowd of football players when the boat rolled. The hatchway we had left was spouting smoke that lingered along the deck and gave an impression that all amidships was on fire. Wind blew the smoke aside to show ghostly sailors in ghostly undershirts dragging a snaky length of hose. Lights winkered aft, and the bos'n darted by like a gnome in oilskins and sou'wester; shouted oaths, and led the hose-crew into the smoke-fogged companion.

The Arcturus, meantime, was shouldering into a goodly gale that filled the night with stinging spindrift, slammed the ship a-rolling with a beam sea and flung green water over the heeling bows. Perhaps you can fancy the situation as it came over me just then. A tramp steamer struggling through the night on a storm-roughed patch of South China Sea that might have been the end of the world and was, so far as the ship with her useless radio was concerned. The ship's captain lying that very minute in a canvas shroud in his cabin, dead with a murderer's bullet in his temple. The assassin, known to be one of the passengers (yet absolutely unknown), lurking near in a mask of innocence—a demon, a cobra-dangerous killer in our midst.

And now, the ship, itself, was on fire.

The siren brayed; men ran with lanterns, hatchets and hose; the bearded second mate scampered down from the bridge, clad in pink-striped pyjamas

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and rubber boots; and Mrs. Phillipots finally fainted on Dr. Smartbeck's elbow and tossed him off his footing.

"The cabins!" De Stroon pulled on my arm and yelled in my ear. "Those cabins are burning. *Herr Gott!* My money is in there—"

"And mine!" Gorn shouted; leaped from his place at the rail and lunged into the smoky companion. De Stroon was after him. Major Phillipots yelled something and started to follow, but tripped on his prostrate wife, floundered against Norwood who fought him off shrieking: "Are you trying to kill me?"

Dr. Smartbeck wrung his hands and glared nervously at Hope Brown, as if he thought her to be Bentfinger and ready to take this opportunity for another killing. The girl shivered and a stray gleam of light caught in relief her white face.

"My—my cape is in there. It's going to be dreadfully cold if we're forced to the lifeboats—"

A wooden Indian (which isn't such a bad description of myself at that time) would have come to life and answered the appeal of those gray eyes.

"I'll get your cape!" I told her with a bravery of voice that didn't go with the feeling in my stomach; and then I was back in that corridor, staggering through the choky fog, making for the girl's cabin.

Shadows darted about me in the smoke, and I caught a gleam from De Stroon's gold teeth; saw Gorn plunge out of a cabin that didn't seem to be the one he had previously occupied; and bumped into a sailor with a hatchet. The crew was jammed at the aft end of the corridor. I could hear the roar of the playing fire-hose. Water swirled across the floor underfoot.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Korean Bird Cage Underwear

ONE of the strangest costumes in the world is the Korean summer underwear of woven rattan which resembles nothing more than a bird cage. It consists of a loosely woven basketwork which is worn next the skin and serves the very useful purpose of allowing air circulation and protecting the clothing from becoming soaked with perspiration in this hot Asiatic country. So comfortable it is, despite its structure, that Europeans adopt it to alleviate the heat. Over this is worn pure white clothing which occupies all the time of the women in washing and ironing.

Another queer piece of clothing is the high hat of woven horsehair which resembles those worn by Gaston and Alphonse in the comic strip and never fails to provoke mirth when first seen. These were formerly worn at all times by the natives, even while working and sleeping, but are not so common now. They cost a considerable amount and were loosely glued together so a wetting was disastrous. To meet this difficulty the wearers carried small folded cones of oiled paper which they produced at the first sprinkle and used as tiny umbrellas to protect their precious hats, leaving the rest of their bodies to soak.

E. R. McCarthy.

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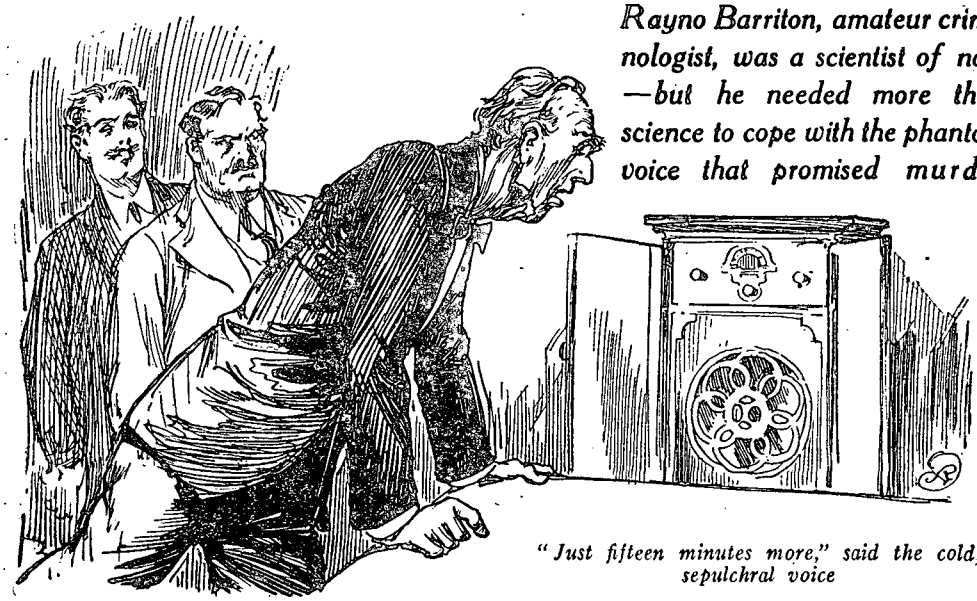
The Unseen Death

Rayno Barriton, amateur criminologist, was a scientist of note —but he needed more than science to cope with the phantom voice that promised murder



"Just fifteen minutes more," said the cold, sepulchral voice

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

"WHAT'S this? You still fooling with them test tubes and junk when you were supposed to be fixing me a dinner with that curry you claim you can make? I don't believe you know how to cook a curried dinner!"

Rayno Barriton, rich amateur scientist and intimate friend of the big and gruff Police Commissioner Delaney looked up from the bench in his well-equipped laboratory and smiled at his friend.

"Sorry, commissioner," he apologized. "I'm a devil of a host. You see, I was just in the midst of some experiments that I've been working on for a long time, and I guess Togo forgot to remind me."

Delaney started to rest his beefy hand on an empty laboratory table, then snatched it away with a yell. Barriton jumped from his seat.

"What's the matter, commissioner —get your hand in some acid?"

"Good Godfrey, Barriton—I tell you, I felt something on that damned witches' table of yours — something cold and furry! But there's nothing there!"

Barriton sighed with relief, and chuckled. "So that's where I left it." He walked over and scrutinized the table narrowly.

"Sorry to say that you complimented me a bit, commissioner. You can see it if you look sharply." He pointed toward an apparently vacant spot on the surface, and the police official made out a vague little shape, almost transparent.

Barriton picked it up. "Another

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failure," he sighed. "I thought I was on the right track—but I've never come even as close to success as the Austrian experimenters have reported recently. My rats always die. I wonder, if I used a colloidal suspension of—"

"Lay off, Rayno! When you start that chemical rigmarole of yours, I give up. It ain't in nature for things to be invisible, and live, though, Rayno. It 'd be dangerous, too." Delaney was suddenly grave. He was a stranger to the sciences, a man without formal education who had worked his way to the top through sheer grit and common sense; but he had a shrewd enough mind that quickly linked up all new developments of science or industry to possible effects upon his profession.

"Ah, well," Barriton shrugged, "experimentation is a matter of trial and error—mostly error. I can't expect to succeed with a thing like this, too easily. Some day— Anyway, I promised you a curry dinner, so let's forget our prospective callings for a while. I'll show you a curry rich with cream and the pulp of apples and coconut meat and spices from far Cathay."

RAYNO and the commissioner were having their after-dinner whisky and sodas in the library when Barriton's servant entered.

"Commissioner Delaney's office would like to speak to him on the telephone," he announced.

The portly head of the New York police department excused himself with a gesture of impatience. He returned from the phone in a state of annoyance.

"This is a devil of a note, Rayno," he said. "Old J. Horace Cromwell's just been stabbed to death. He's a pretty well known lawyer and while the inspector says it's dead open-and-shut I think I had better go up there myself."

"Surely," answered Barriton.

"Why don't you run up with me? I gather that the murderer is telling some amazingly wild story or other. Might be of interest to you as a psychologist."

Barriton agreed and without changing from dinner clothes the two hopped into Barriton's roadster and crawled through the heavy theater traffic, pulling up presently into the driveway of a large gloomy house that towered over Riverside Drive, casting its black shadows toward the waters of the Hudson River.

A patrolman admitted them silently, leading them up to the third floor and along a heavily carpeted hall shrouded in gloom. Another uniformed man answered the subdued knock on a hall door.

"What's the trouble?" asked Delaney as they entered a study lined with rows of law books and lit by a single dim reading lamp.

"Looks like plain murder, sir," answered the inspector of detectives who was waiting inside. "I haven't let them touch anything. Medical examiner's on his way." Delaney grunted and crossed the room, followed by Barriton.

An elderly, bald-headed man was seated in an overstuffed leather chair, head thrown back and eyes staring unblinkingly at the ceiling.

The man was dead. Protruding from his left side was the handle of a knife, still in the wound. It had entered his side just under his lower rib and had ranged upward just to the rear of where his left elbow would naturally have fallen. It could not possibly have missed his heart. Barriton dropped his head to the man's chest, felt his wrist,

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knowing, however, that he would find no signs of life.

There were two other men in the room—one obviously a very frightened butler.

"Who are you?" Delaney addressed the other, a young man with sleek black hair, sallow skin and horn-rimmed glasses. The youth was sitting drooped in a chair nervously twisting and untwisting a handkerchief. Delaney stood over him eying him with contempt.

"I am Edwin Howard, sir," the young man answered in a hollow voice. "Mr. Cromwell's secretary." He was trembling violently.

"All right, let's hear your story," demanded the officer. "From start to finish—and don't leave out anything." Delaney could not speak politely to obvious physical cowards.

"Well, sir," the secretary started haltingly, "I dare say you won't believe what I'm going to say—"

"I dare say I won't, either," barked Delaney. "But tell it anyway. Speak up!"

"Well, sir—"

"Dammit leave out that 'well, sir,' and get on with your story."

"Well—I mean, Mr. Cromwell was stabbed while I was sitting facing him," the secretary blurted out fearfully, yet with a trace of defiance. "The door was locked and there was no one else in the room. We were talking when suddenly he sprang up and shrieked, then fell back in his chair. I ran across the room and saw him as he is now, with that knife in his side. That's all I know."

"Who stabbed him?"

"I don't know!" There was obstinacy in the youth's voice.

"Didn't you see it?"

"No! When I went to his side and saw the knife—I didn't see it from across the room; I'm near-sighted—I called to him, then put my head to his chest to see if his heart was still beating. It wasn't, so I unlocked the door—it had been locked all the time except when we went in and out—and ran out. I was excited and didn't think to use the phone in this room. I called to the butler, who is the only other person in the house now and then ran out to the sidewalk shouting for a policeman. I brought that officer back and he called up the proper authorities. That's all I know, sir."

"THAT'S not all!" snapped Delaney. It was easy to see that Delaney, convinced the man was lying and lying clumsily, intended to wring the truth from him before the culprit had time to fix on a better story.

"I beg your pardon, but it is all, sir," insisted the youth with weak stubbornness.

"I beg your pardon, but you're a liar!" Delaney's voice was threatening. "Why did you two have the door to these quarters locked? People don't lock themselves in their rooms in their own homes. Answer me that—quick!"

The young man stuttered, started to answer, then halted himself.

"Speak up! You stabbed him! Admit it and save yourself trouble!"

"No, sir! I swear I didn't." The secretary was wringing his hands in an agony of fright.

"Then who did?"

"I don't know!"

"You do!"

"All right, then—*it was an invisible man!*"

Rayno Barriton suddenly came alive. He jumped out of the chair he had taken and approached the youth. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

"No one else *could* have stabbed

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him," returned the youth. "Mr. Cromwell and I have been locked in these rooms for a week—" He halted, confused at having said more than he had intended.

"Now we're getting somewhere!" grunted Delaney. "Why were you locked in here?"

The secretary saw that he was getting himself into deeper water all the time. "I suppose I'd better tell it all—"

"You're damn' right! Hurry it up!" Delaney snapped.

"Mr. Cromwell was frightened, sir. He had been threatened with death. And he had secluded himself in here. I looked after him, even prepared his meals so that no one might poison him. But they got him anyway."

"Who got him?"

"I don't know who it was," the youth answered wearily. "It was some one who has hated him for twenty years. In fact 'The Voice' said it was twenty years to-day that whatever it was happened—"

"What do you mean by 'The Voice'?" asked Barriton.

The boy crouched down in his chair, his head buried in his hands. His whole body was trembling.

"Just about a week before Mr. Cromwell was killed," he said haltingly, "the radio started suddenly, although we were both across the room from it. Then a voice began speaking from it, promising vengeance for something. It came from the radio, came out of nothing, out of thin air. After that it came anywhere, at his office, here, everywhere. We've heard it—"

"We?"

"Yes. I've heard it, too. Mr. Cromwell would even talk back to it toward the last. *The voice could hear and answer Mr. Cromwell!* But it was relentless. It told him the hour it would strike—and it struck! Oh, it was horrible!" The boy shivered.

Delaney looked significantly at Barriton and tapped his head. Barriton did not altogether agree that the seeming murderer was as crazy as the commissioner indicated.

"WHY didn't Cromwell report 'The Voice' and why didn't you tell us about it at first?" Barriton asked.

"Mr. Cromwell wouldn't dare do that," answered the youth. "He thought he was going crazy and I thought I was, too. And then, the things the voice talked about involved others, respectable people about whom the things it mentioned shouldn't be said."

"What's this?" demanded Barriton, showing excitement. "Whom else did it mention? Don't you realize that by not telling us this you're jeopardizing the lives of others? Whom did it mention?"

"Merle Beggs and Franklin J. Latimer." The youth fell back in his chair, hopeless now that he felt he was betraying the secrets of other people.

"Did 'The Voice' say it was after them?"

"No! But apparently for the same reason."

Delaney jerked to his feet, glancing apprehensively at Barriton. Beggs and Latimer were well known to them. Both figures were prominent in the world of money, were mighty forces in Wall Street.

"Commissioner, we're going to Latimer's," announced Barriton. "I have reason to believe that what this boy says may be the truth. I know it's possible, anyway. Let's hurry."

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Delaney let himself be directed. He was sure this case was closed, anyway; the secretary was guilty. But there might be something more. Several times he had found that his friend the young amateur scientist had discovered things that he didn't believe existed. Thanks to a vast family fortune Barriton could and did spend most of his time in the experimental sciences, and his mind was a complete encyclopædia of little-known and obscure information. Delaney depended upon him heavily when it came to unraveling some of his problems that seemed to indicate the presence of factors that were not in the normal course of human and scientific affairs.

Delaney addressed the uniformed officer who was guarding the body of Cromwell. "Hold the butler, of course. But this Howard bird had better be locked up as soon as the coroner gets here. We're not through with him yet."

They were quickly into Barriton's roadster, shooting down the Drive and headed for Fifth Avenue, and the home of Latimer. Barriton took the corners on two wheels, sped through the winding drives of Central Park and pulled up at the door of Latimer's impressive home.

"Mr. Latimer is not in," the butler told them in answer to their ring. "He is out of town."

"You tell him that Police Commissioner Delaney wants to see him right this minute," demanded the officer. "And make it snappy before I take a punch at you."

He shoved the butler on his errand and elbowed his way into the house, followed by Barriton. They did not wait but followed the servant into the elevator and up to the second floor, stopping only while the servant announced them. They were ushered in immediately.

FRANKLIN LATIMER sat in a heavy wing chair before a carved walnut desk. He was old and angular and his face was seamed. Flabby skin hung loosely from his jaws, dropping in folds into his stiff dress collar. Sparse gray hair crowned a face that was haggard. Fear-dulled eyes, set too close together, studied the newcomers with suspicion. Barriton and Delaney saw immediately that something terrible was affecting him.

"What is it you want of me, gentlemen?" Latimer asked in a voice that was husky.

"We want to know the connection between you and J. Horace Cromwell which has just led to his murder!" stated Delaney abruptly.

Barriton watched the face of the financier. The man's eyes opened wide with horror, his hands trembled with a palsy that could not be stopped by his gripping the arms of the chair. Blood fled from his face, leaving it an ashen gray like the face of one already dead.

The man half rose from his chair, an involuntary motion of fright, then fell back weakly, his lean body trembling as his head sank to his hands.

"Cromwell—murdered! Then it's true!" he muttered. "And I wasn't—"

"Wasn't what?" demanded Delaney, quickly following this lead. The man didn't answer.

"What was it you were going to say?" interjected Barriton. "That you now know that you weren't hearing things, that you weren't crazy? That's what you mean, isn't it?"

Old Latimer weakly nodded his head in affirmation.

"Tell us about it," persisted Barri-

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ton. "And hurry, man. It may mean saving your own life. Don't you understand?"

The lean old man in dinner clothes looked up at Barriton helplessly, pleadingly. His suffering had been too great, had deadened his mental faculties. He couldn't organize his thoughts. Barriton prompted him:

"Did you hear the voice of some one talking to you in this room, threatening you?"

The old man nodded his head.

"And this man was one who held a grudge against you and Cromwell?"

"Yes!" Latimer's voice was almost a whisper.

"Tell us who the man is, where we can locate him before he does other mischief, kills you or some one else. Don't you understand that the law is trying to help you?" Barriton stood beside the wing chair, touched the old man on the shoulder.

The shaking figure merely sat with bowed head, did not answer. Delaney, astonished at this confirmation of the scientist's ideas, let his friend take the lead. Again Barriton tried to persuade the financier to talk:

"Don't you realize he'll kill you as he did Cromwell? That he'll kill others if we don't stop him? Talk, man! Is it some one you've wronged?"

A fleeting look of guilt flashed across the gray face, only to be driven away by one of obstinacy. It was clear that the man who had fought and amassed millions would not now, even with the fear of death hanging over his head, tell his secret even to those who would help him. He poured himself a drink of whisky with shaking hands, drained it and poured another from the decanter on the table. Then he spoke.

"It's nothing, gentlemen, nothing that concerns you." There was still defiance in his hollow voice, but his fear-stricken eyes continued their roving search of the room. He glanced often at the grandfather's clock. He started, gripped the arms of his chair as the Westminster chimes tolled the quarter-hour before nine o'clock. The chord filled the room with sweetness, then died. There was silence.

SUDDENLY the harsh click of the switch on the radio cabinet. A low grating noise issued forth. Then a voice!

"Just fifteen minutes more, Franklin Latimer!"

The sepulchral voice was cold, deep and penetrating.

"Just fifteen minutes until my vengeance shall be given me!"

Latimer started up from his chair, stood paralyzed, the light of insane fear in his eyes. Barriton and Delaney cast startled eyes around the room. "Dramatics!" was on the tip of Delaney's tongue—but the word never came out!

There was no space that would have concealed the body of a man. Delaney pulled at his bristly mustache and looked around. Latimer stood, his hands braced on the table. His mouth hung loosely open, his dull eyes staring at the radio cabinet. Out of the loud speaker the normal rasping noise continued, but no voice followed.

Barriton got up and started to walk toward the cabinet. As suddenly and inexplicably as it had started, the switch clicked off. The room became silent. A sweat broke out on Delaney's broad forehead.

Suddenly Latimer broke, his iron nerves snapped. He settled weakly to his chair, dropped his head into his hands and sobbed.

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"I can't stand this any longer," he moaned. "I'll tell you everything. But I'll have to talk fast. I shall be dead at nine o'clock."

Barriton and Delaney dropped into chairs facing the sobbing man. Neither spoke while the financier hesitated, gathering his wits.

"Twenty years ago to-day," Latimer began in a low voice, "Cromwell gained a court decision for the Grand International Chemical Works which was owned by Merle Beggs and myself. The firm was not large, but we were doing nicely. There had come to us just a year or so before that time a chemist who offered us certain discoveries which he said would replace the use of aniline as the base for most of the commercial dyes.

"As you probably know, prior to the war practically all dyestuffs used here were bought in Germany. So, you see, a cheaper means of making them would be highly profitable to its owner. We didn't buy the man's process, but did give him a job in our experimental laboratory.

"Later we discovered this process for ourselves and patented it shortly after the World War cut off the supply of dyes from Germany. That process is the basis of the fortunes of Merle Beggs, Cromwell and myself.

"Now this man sued us for stealing his process. We were defended by Cromwell and the suit was carried to the higher courts where we were at last declared the legal owners of the process in question."

Latimer droned on in a low and faltering voice. His eyes bored into the face of the clock, he seemed conscious of its every tick, certain that each booming second brought him closer to his doom.

"And now," he continued, "this man has come back to plague us. He has killed Cromwell, will kill me I am certain. And we are guiltless. The law—"

"*You are not guiltless, Latimer!*

The Voice spoke sharply, coming out of nowhere! The radio was silent, it had not been snapped on as before. Chills ran down the backs of the three men.

Barriton tried to establish the direction from which the sound had come. He got to his feet hastily and crossed the room, explored the corner from which it seemed to have drifted. He found no clew, nothing that would shed light on the source of the voice. The clock ticked in a monotone that sounded like thunder in the dimly-lighted room.

Barriton shook off the hypnotic effect of the uncanny voice. He crossed the room, faced Latimer.

"What was this man's name?" he asked. "You'll have to tell us so we can trace him."

"He was an Austrian named—"

Latimer broke off the sentence, finished with a scream. He threw his hands upward, then tumbled to the floor and lay still.

The long handle of a keen-bladed knife protruded from a bloody wound in his side. He was quiet in death as the clock boomed out the hour of nine.

BARRITON and Delaney dropped to their knees beside the man, examined him. The point of the knife had entered his side, slanting upward, piercing the heart. Both men stared at the sight with dumb amazement. Delaney looked at Barriton helplessly.

Barriton answered the implied question. "There's nothing else it could be," he stated solemnly. "I think

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you'll be convinced now that the little secretary at Cromwell's was telling the truth. I've been inclined to believe him all along."

"Rayno," Delaney said in a voice that was markedly subdued, "this kind of stuff is too much for me. And it's tempting the Lord. Such things ain't human, they ain't mortal."

"They are mortal," returned Barriton. "Everything's mortal—there's nothing that can't be accounted for by simple logic. Even this!"

"How—?"

The grating of a key in the door leading to the hall interrupted Delaney. Both men looked up from their positions on the floor. The cigar dropped from Delaney's mouth.

The key in the door lock turned, yet no hand turned it. The door knob turned. The door opened.

"Stop it!" Barriton shouted. He jumped to his feet and dashed to the door, tried to slam it. It would not close. The butler stood outside, his hand on the knob.

"Is there trouble here, sir?" the servant asked. "I heard a scream."

Barriton pulled him inside. The man saw the corpse of his master, mumbled a prayer and crossed himself. Delaney was on his feet by now.

"Did you unlock that door?" he demanded.

"Why, no, sir," answered the servant. "It was swinging open when I arrived. I hurried up from the basement just as soon as I heard the scream. I—"

"That's enough," interrupted Barriton. "You know what that means, Delaney? This invisible murderer has made his escape. He'll go straight to Beggs's home. It's certain he intends to kill the whole crowd this night. We'll have to hurry."

Delaney agreed instantly. He grabbed the phone, got headquarters and ordered men to come to Latimer's, others to meet him at the Beggs house. Then he gave his attention to the butler.

"You stay here until the officers arrive. And if you get away we'll catch and hang you as sure as you're a foot high. Let's go."

They dashed downstairs hatless, and Barriton was grinding the gears of his roadster as the car shot down Fifth Avenue disregarding traffic lights and pedestrians. The Public Library whizzed past them, then Thirty-fourth Street. The speeding roadster drove night-prowling taxis to the curb, shoved angry drivers aside to save their fenders. Angry curses flung at them were left behind. A motorcycle policeman turned into the avenue from a side street, switched on his red headlight, set his siren screeching and sped in pursuit.

"Got to stop at a drug store," Rayno shouted above the roar of the car. "One at the Twenty-third Street corner. When that cop catches up with us there make him clear our path the rest of the way."

The brakes screamed in agony as Barriton brought the car to a halt at the Flatiron Building and dashed into the drug store. He was out again in less than a minute, a full paper bag in his hand.

Delaney was cursing the policeman who had pulled up beside him.

"And you keep us a clear right of way," he finished telling the surprised officer. "Right down to Washington Square, North."

The patrolman opened his siren again, the car jerked away from the curb and roared down to the end of the avenue, took a corner on two wheels

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and pulled up before a big red brick house near Washington Arch.

DELANEY bore down on the door bell, Barriton clamored at the knocker. From far back on the avenue came the screeching of another police car.

The pair bounded into the hall as a servant opened the massive front door. "Where's your master's quarters?" demanded the commissioner, ignoring the servant's protests.

"First door at the head of the stairs," stuttered the frightened man.

Barriton and Delaney took the broad steps two at a time, pounded on the door of Merle Beggs's private chambers.

"What can we do when we get in?" Delaney panted. "This is awful."

"I'll show you," answered Barriton; then, cryptically, "we'll put salt on his tail."

"What's wanted?" The question came through the door.

"This is the police, let us in."

"I don't understand. I—"

"Yes, you do," roared Delaney. "Cromwell and Latimer are dead and you'll be next if you don't let us in to protect you. Hurry."

The door was thrown open. Beggs, a man unhealthily fat, was in his dressing gown. One look at the man was enough to convince them that he had been going through the same living hell as had his friends.

Barriton closed and locked the door after him, pocketing the key, and while Delaney was explaining to the horrified Beggs about the murders Barriton strode across the room and locked the door to the bathroom, dropping that key into his pocket with the other. Finally he locked the last door which led into Beggs's bedroom. He closed and locked the windows in spite of the heat which was hardly dissipated by the strong electric fan which ran at low speed on the table. Barriton turned it on full force.

"Now, Mr. Beggs," explained Barriton, "you may believe it or not, but this man who killed your friends is completely invisible. He managed to escape from Latimer's because we couldn't see him and he is no doubt headed for your place to complete his night's work.

"We know the whole story about the chemist, and we're here to protect you. But we must have this chemist's name. Tell us all you can that will help us to trace him before he goes any further."

Beggs stood palsied with fear. "Why, surely," he mumbled, "He is an Austrian by the name of—"

Beggs halted, his mouth flew open. He threw up his hands, clutched at his stomach. He screamed and fell face forward before his visitors. A knife protruded from his back.

"Too late," Delaney groaned in utter helplessness, staring wildly about the room. He did not have to be told that the murderer had done his work well. Nor did Barriton give much more than a quick glance at the prostrate man.

"We've got him locked in, got him cornered!" Barriton was excited now. "This murderer is more important than the victim! Get your gun ready and stand by that hall door!" He snapped the order at the officer.

"Ready?" He dug the paper bag out of his pocket.

Three steps took him to the buzzing electric fan. He tipped the bag over its whirling blades.

A black fog shot out into the room as a stream of powdered lampblack drained into the fan. The floating

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black soot coiled in smoky spirals in the restless air, filled every corner of the room. Barriton poured out handfuls of it, cast it toward the ceiling where it caught in the air and spread, filling the room with its smoky dust. More handfuls. He whirled the fan about. The air became suffocating with it. Breathing was difficult.

"THERE he is!" It was Barriton's voice. His finger was pointed toward a space between the end of a bookcase and a corner. His last handful of the black dust he heaved full at that corner.

Delaney stared with open-mouthed wonder at the sight which met his gaze. His gun hand was hanging limp.

"Get him!" Barriton snapped, at the same time darting toward the apparition.

In the corner was the faint outline of a naked man, its contour only partially visible, made so by the black soot that adhered to the invisible body! And through that soot-covered shape the wall of the room could be seen!

"That's him!" Delaney partially recovered from the shock of his surprise. He advanced with gun leveled.

Barriton grabbed at the faint specter that looked more like the shadow of half a man than like anything human. His hand grasped living flesh.

The body struggled. Barriton's two arms encircled the body and bore down on it. Almost invisible arms and hands wrapped around his neck, invisible fingers clawed at his throat. Shadows of feet kicked with a force which was far more substantial than ghostly.

Delaney took a hand. The barrel of his pistol slashed down on the three-dimension shadow of a head, cracked against a human skull. The form groaned, slumped to the floor.

"Bracelets!" panted Barriton, still holding the form lest it escape. Delaney flashed steel handcuffs, jerked the two transparent arms together, clicked the steel into place. The links seemed floating inexplicably in air.

"That ought to hold him," he grunted.

Barriton got to his feet, raised the windows, letting the fan clear the room of its black powdery mist. Delaney and he were hardly recognizable as the fresh air cleared the room and the rays of the reading lamp again penetrated the gloom. Their faces were black and the soot had completely smeared the starched fronts of their shirts. But there was nothing funny in the sight as they caught sight of each other.

They were examining the body of Merle Beggs when the squad of policemen broke in and demanded an explanation from them. Commissioner Delaney had to show them his badge before they could believe that the blackened figure was he.

In the corner of the room the form of the murderer was moving. The soot had settled so thickly on him that the complete contour of his body was visible, a hollow black human shape like some nude and gruesome minstrel man. There were places where one could see through the black make-up—could see completely through, observing the inside contour of the body opposite. Nor had the black settled on the eyeballs. The eyelids opened like the vacant holes in a dried skull.

"Call the medical examiner," ordered Delaney. "He's probably got to Latimer's by now." Then, showing some hesitancy, he turned to Barriton. "Maybe you better shake the truth outa *that!* Those things are in your line."

Barriton now had control of himself, was calm despite his disagreeable

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black coating. He was again the experimental scientist interested in this new phenomenon. He managed to subdue a quiver that played around the corners of his mouth when the commissioner delegated him to talk to the creature. Yet a distinct shudder passed through his frame as he forced the murderer into a seat and started questioning him.

"I MIGHT just as well tell it all," agreed the killer. "I've accomplished my purpose and there's nothing left for me.

"I am Friedrich Holtzauer, an Austrian chemist. I came to America foreseeing a great war was inevitable abroad. I offered these three chemical manufacturers the dye base Latimer spoke of. As he told you, they refused to buy it, but employed me in their laboratory. There, by trickery, they managed to get my secret. As you know, I lost when I tried to regain it by law. Realizing that a poor man could never get justice against any one rich enough to hire better lawyers, I set out to get it in my own way. I am now satisfied."

"But," interrupted Barriton, "why did you have to go into all this dramatic stuff?"

"I tried every other way of frightening them into returning to me what was mine, but was unsuccessful. So I gave up that hope and dedicated my life to revenge. Now I have finished my work."

"How did you make yourself invisible?"

"I discovered the method while working with dyes. You wouldn't understand it."

"I'm sure I would," insisted Barriton. "I'm somewhat of a chemist myself. It had something to do with the neutralizing quality of hydrogen, didn't it?"

The renegade chemist sat up in his chair, interested that one speaking in terms of his own profession was before him. Like all specialists, he responded to such knowledge.

"Yes," he answered, and there was pride in his voice. "You've guessed it. As you know, the basic dyes are used to dye animal matter like wool, silk, leather and so forth. It is not so generally known that they will dye flesh as well. You no doubt have seen the 'Blue Man' in the freak shows in America. He died recently and an autopsy showed that all his flesh was tinted the same dark color.

"And as you mentioned a moment ago, hydrogen reducing agents are used in the dye industry to make dyes transparent. You have seen magicians change water from red to green and then back to transparency. A human body has been acted on in the same way. It was performed first in Austria on rats, a few months ago by my brother, also a chemist.

"My job was merely to introduce slowly into my body sufficient dye to completely color all the tissue. Then later I slowly introduced the hydrogen compound until it had made completely colorless and transparent all the colored tissue.

"It was a long and dangerous procedure, but it worked and was worth it for the satisfaction I got out of making those men suffer. Of course, the chemicals were poisonous, as you know, but they inject snake venom into horses in the manufacture of serum until the horse is immune. So by taking the dyes slowly I enabled myself to become immune from their poison. However, I shall not tell you the nature of the hydrogen compound that completed the

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transparency. That is my brother's secret and I hope he profits by it more than I did by mine. That is all."

DELANEY got to his feet. "That's not all," he roared. "You're under arrest for murder. And I'm going to ask you some questions. How'd you get that voice over the radio?"

"I didn't talk over the radio. I simply turned it on and stood before it and talked. At other times I followed the three men from place to place and whispered in their ears. That was enough to drive them almost mad. I got in and out of their houses by merely waiting at the doors until some one opened them."

"How'd you get those knives in? They weren't transparent."

"I took them in at night beforehand and hid them in the linings of the bottoms of their favorite chairs. It was simple to get in and stab them in the back without anybody seeing the knives. Their own bodies hid them."

"How did you manage to beat us down here from Latimer's? We heard you go out."

"I didn't beat you out—I rode with you. You didn't know it, but I was hanging on to the running board of your car all the way down town. And I didn't get in until they opened the door to let you in. I followed you right into this room before you locked the door."

Delaney grunted, rubbed his hand over his blackened face, pondered a moment, then turned to the sergeant of the amazed group of officers standing speechless in the far corner of the room.

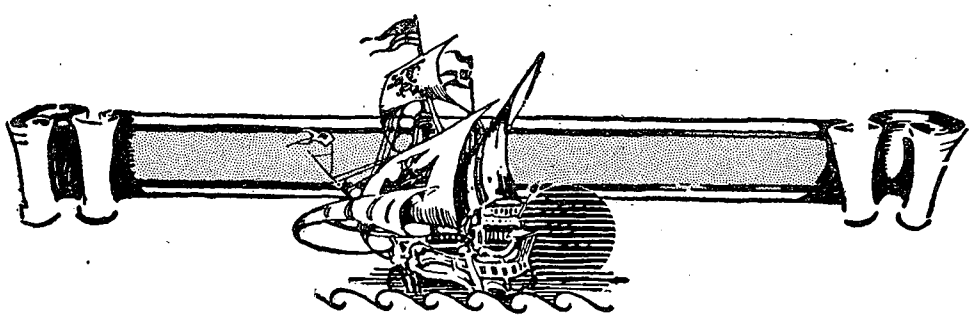
"Take this freak down to Centre Street and paint him with iodine or something so you can see him. We can't fry a man we can't see."

"Don't worry," came the voice from the drooping specter in the chair. "You won't have to electrocute me. I've taken so much poison in this dye that to be deprived of it for a few hours will kill me anyway. And you'll never learn from me what it is, so you can't keep me alive."

"I don't want to know," growled Delaney. "Rayno, do you suppose that whisky and soda we started is still good? I need something to wash this soot outa my throat while I listen to you tell how you came to believe that secretary in the first place."

"Sure," agreed Rayno Barriton. "Psychology. He was too intelligent a man to invent such an incriminating defense. And you remember my rat—I was anxious, for more reasons than one, to see the man whose experiments had succeeded."

THE END.



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"Are you giving me a run-around?" demanded the gangster

Pirate of Wall Street

Bent upon avenging his father's death, young Reggie Blake finds that treachery is one of the chief weapons of the New York multimillionaire he is fighting

By FRED MacISAAC
Author of "The Hothouse World," "Balata," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

SWORN to avenge his father, young Reggie Blake, New York lawyer, girds himself for a finish fight with T. F. Speaks, known as the Black Devil of Wall Street, who had wrested control of the M. W. and Coast Railroad from the elder Blake, causing him to commit suicide.

Finding himself penniless, Reggie is thrown over by his fiancée, Rita Van Storm, who nevertheless keeps the valuable diamond engagement ring he had given her. In his search for employment, Reggie meets a young stenographer, Ruth Stickney, who proves to be Speaks's runaway daughter. They become friends in distress after her quick wit saves Reggie from arrest as the "shill" of the sidewalk pitch man, Aristides Lamont. As Reggie escorts her home they are accosted by a gangster, Art Hornsman, who had struck up an acquaintance with Ruth. In the struggle, Hornsman is killed by his own gun. Again Ruth aids Reggie's escape.

Fearful, however, that she will be arrested for questioning, she decides to abandon her present life and return to the safety of Speaks's apartment. He had not seen her for many years, but he takes her back.

Speaks, meantime, confides to his lieutenant, Randolph Cook, of the law firm of Cook, Burton and Hurd, that

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control of the railroad hinges between himself and John Grant, another financier. They have an equal amount of shares, the only remaining stock being in a trust fund left to Reggie by his father. The fund is to be a surprise to Reggie on his approaching twenty-fifth birthday. Speaks commands Cook, under threat of exposure as a murderer, to locate Reggie and either purchase his stock from him for $50,000 or see that he is killed so that Speaks can eventually get the stock.

Cook is at a loss as to how to locate Reggie, but his problem is solved for him when Aristides Lamont, a street faker who has seen better days and who has taken a fancy to Reggie, sends the young man with a letter to Cook. Reggie, not knowing that he is soon to come into a fortune, uses the letter in an effort to secure employment, after being cautioned by Aristides that Cook is a crook.

CHAPTER XII *(Continued).*

INTO THE SPIDER'S WEB.

"I KNEW your father slightly," said Cook. "Several years ago my firm did some business for him. Like everybody else I was greatly distressed to hear of his tragic death."

Reggie compressed his lips and nodded.

"Left you pretty flat, I understand."

"Yes, sir."

"You could have come to me without a letter of introduction," said Cook reproachfully.

Blake smiled bitterly. "I called several weeks ago in search of employment, but I was refused work."

Cook looked distressed. "I did not know that. I wish you had seen me. Of course we were not taking men on at that time; very little business, you know, but I would have made a place for you."

"I'm sorry I was unable to see you," said Reggie.

"However, I was glad to hear from an old friend. Haven't had any news of Lamont for years. How is the old boy?"

"Very well, sir."

"What does he do for a living nowadays?" asked Cook casually.

Reggie grinned. "He says he is a high-powered salesman."

Cook laughed. "Still selling fake merchandise on street corners off the old pitch table?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, well! You know, my boy, a great many years ago, when I was on my uppers, I took a flyer at that game myself, but I wasn't cut out for it. It required less brains to succeed in a respectable business than it did to push the corn cures and the paring knife and the silver plater."

"Indeed, sir."

"I have the kindliest recollections of Aristides," continued Cook genially. "I'd like to see him. Where does he live?"

"He was living on West Fifty-eighth Street," said Reggie, "but he left town to-day. He says the city stifles him."

"Did he leave you his address?"

Reggie shook his head. "Says he hates to receive letters because he has to answer them."

Cook looked so disappointed that Reggie wondered why Aristides had coached him to make these untruthful statements.

"Well, well," said Cook, "let's talk about you. You have found making a living a tough job, eh?"

"I don't seem to be cut out for any-

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thing except the law and I have found no openings in that profession."

"How did you happen to meet Lamont?"

"We got acquainted in a restaurant," said Reggie. This reply was also from Aristides's coaching.

"You look to me like a competent young man," said Cook. "You'll get along once you get a start. I suppose you would sell your prospects for the next two or three years for a small sum."

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"You're wrong. You have a good head on your shoulders. No doubt you are very well grounded in law."

"I graduated with honors from law school."

"I thought so. If you had some capital and were able to set up in business for yourself, you would be making big money in a couple of years. You have latent assets, a horde of society friends."

"I have cut myself off from them," said Reggie shortly.

"Because you were flat broke. Pride—I know. But if you had capital enough to start up for yourself and to mingle once more, you would get plenty of briefs. For the first year, of course, you would do little or nothing," Cook said.

"WHY discuss what is impossible?" asked Reggie. "I have no money."

Cook smiled benevolently. "Borrow it."

"I'll never ask anybody for a cent," said Reggie emphatically.

"Yet I am confident that financing you would be profitable. I might do it myself."

"Thank you; but all I ask is a salaried job."

Damn stiff-necked cub, Cook thought to himself. But his smile grew broader and kindlier.

"I'll make a confession," he said. "Some years ago your father did me a big service. There is gratitude in New York, though you seem to doubt it. I'll make you a proposition. What do you think your total earnings during the next three years would be if you hung out your shingle?"

"Mighty little."

"Ten thousand dollars?"

"Possibly."

"You underestimate yourself. I'll give you twenty-five thousand dollars in return for your income from all sources during the next three years. That will enable you to live well, take a nice office and work up trade among your friends."

Reggie was so astonished that he could only stare at the other man. Cook's face, from the nose down, was a picture of good will, but the eyes were cold and repelling.

"I am overwhelmed, sir," he said slowly. "I can't understand why you should make such a generous offer. I can't accept it because I am certain that you overestimate my earning powers and I would find myself in your debt to an extent I might never be able to repay."

"Nonsense!" cried Cook with a hearty laugh. "I'm taking that chance. If you don't make good, you owe me nothing. Here, I'll write out an agreement."

He seized his pen and paper and began to scribble rapidly while Reggie stared at him in bewilderment. Why was this man doing this astonishing thing? Why should a stranger urge upon him a large sum of money when his friends had turned their backs on him? Cook was a lawyer. He was

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aware that a young attorney without experience would be fortunate if he earned five thousand dollars in three years.

He studied the man. Despite his jovial manner he did not inspire confidence and he had heard Aristides denounce him in the strongest possible language. His reputation in the profession was that of a hard, cold, able attorney. As a general thing lawyers were not philanthropic.

As Cook finished his secretary entered. "Pardon me, sir," he said, "but Mr. Speaks wishes you to call him as soon as possible."

"Ah, yes," said Cook. "You glance over this agreement, Mr. Blake. I'll be back in a minute."

He did not see that Reggie's eyes were flashing fire. The mystery was explained, and in no satisfactory manner. Reggie saw the whole thing now. Cook was not acting for himself. He evidently handled the legal business of T. F. Speaks. This offer came from Speaks. The unconscionable scoundrel evidently had the remnant of a conscience. Having killed the father and robbed him of millions, he was willing to toss to the starving son a scrap of what was rightfully his.

Well, Reggie would accept no charity from T. F. Speaks. He had a feud on with Speaks. He would bring that villain low if he lived to do so. And if Cook handled the legal business of T. F. Speaks, it would be impossible for the son of Reginald Blake to work for him. He had wasted his time coming down here.

HE glanced without interest at the agreement. Cook agreed to turn over to him the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars to be used to establish him in business. In return for this Blake agreed to pay to Randolph Cook all money which might accrue to him from any source whatsoever in the course of the next three years.

Certainly a one-sided arrangement and entirely on his side. Thinly disguised charity from one who had wronged him beyond forgiveness. He tossed it contemptuously upon the desk. What a break for him, the entrance of the secretary with the phone message from his enemy!

"Well, well," said Cook, bustling in, "have you read it? Well, all we have to do is to sign it and I'll give you a check immediately."

"I am very much obliged to you, sir," said Reggie quietly, "but I have made up my mind not to accept your kind offer."

"Why, you young idiot, why not?" cried Cook angrily.

"Because I propose to stand or fall on my own."

"And this permits you to do it. It's a straight business proposition."

Reggie shook his head. "I can't see it that way."

Cook sat down. His face was red and Reggie observed that his hand, as he lifted the agreement, was trembling.

"Upon my word," he said. "I don't understand you. Well, I suppose you think you couldn't make good upon twenty-five thousand. To show my confidence in you I'll increase the amount."

"No, thank you, sir."

"I'll make it fifty thousand," cried Cook. "Are you out of your mind?"

"One would think you were, to offer a fortune upon such terms. No, sir."

"What on earth do you want?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"But, damn it, you came in here looking for a fifty dollar a week job."

"I have changed my mind about

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that, too," said Reggie, who got upon his feet. "Good morning, sir."

"What's the matter with you?" shouted Cook. "I'll give you a job if that's all you want."

"May I ask one question?"

"Certainly."

"You represent Speaks, don't you?"

"Well, yes, in a way."

"That man killed my father. I couldn't work for him either directly or indirectly."

"Ah!" exclaimed Cook. "Then leave me your address," he pleaded as Reggie moved toward the door. "I understand your attitude. But if I hear of anything elsewhere I'll get in touch with you."

Reggie saw no harm in giving him his address and did so. While he was writing it, Cook excused himself for a moment and beckoned to a clerk in an outer room. "Follow that man in my office," he said. "Report to me where he lives."

Under his breath he muttered, "I'd like to kill that fool secretary."

In no better state than when he entered, Reggie Blake left the law office and took the subway uptown. For the moment he was uplifted by his refusal of a small fortune, but that would soon wear off and he would be face to face again with grim reality.

He did not observe the young man who entered the subway car at his heels and followed him out at Columbus Circle.

THE house of Grant & Co. was one of the oldest, strongest and most respectable in Wall Street and John Grant, head of the firm, was known all over the world as a great banker, a great sportsman and a great philanthropist. He was a tall, spare man of sixty with a closely cropped gray mustache, prominent nose, a pair of stern blue eyes and a nervous manner. He had been in bad health recently, but had returned from four months at a European spa in excellent condition.

The absence of John Grant had been fatal to Reginald Blake, senior, for the financier was one acquaintance to whom he could have appealed in his struggle against the Black Devil with some hope of success. Grant, as a matter of fact, berated his partners for failing to jump in and help Blake in his emergency.

"The M. W. and Coast is one of the best managed properties in the country," he told his staff, "and it's a crime that a pirate like Speaks has secured control of it. I should have been notified of the situation."

"Speaks swooped upon the road suddenly and unexpectedly," explained William Field, his vice president. "He swamped the road by heavy selling and had Blake licked in three days."

"Sold short, did he?"

"Of course. At least a hundred thousand shares. Maybe more."

Grant's eyes began to gleam. "But he took over Blake's holdings, which were fifty-one per cent. If he sold more than a hundred thousand shares he had to let go some Blake stock. Of course it is generally believed that he has control and nobody but a fool would buy minority stock in a Speaks enterprise. Go out quietly and buy what you can and get proxies for anything you can't buy. Any man caught with a block of M. W. and Coast, now, must be shaking in his shoes."

"We'll take a heavy loss if he has control," warned Field. "He'll bear it down to nothing."

"It won't be the first chance we've taken or the first loss we have sustained," said John Grant. "I liked old

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Blake even if the fellow hadn't spoken to me for two or three years because of a little difference over a bridge game. I'll risk losing a million or two for a look at Speaks's face if I should walk into the annual meeting with control in my hands."

So, while Speaks was still congratulating himself upon his victory, the representatives of Grant & Co. all over the country were calling upon stockholders and purchasing stock or getting signatures to proxy blanks. As their transactions were direct there was little reflection in the stock market of their operations.

Meanwhile, Speaks, having turned over to brokers fifty-five hundred shares of Blake's railroad stock to cover his short interests and, assuming that no other big firm would dare dabble in the securities of the road which he was supposed to hold in his pocket, followed his usual tactics of reducing the price of the stock by false rumors of the road's condition in the hope of picking up what he lacked at a big profit.

AS it happened, his tactics were helpful to the agents of Grant & Co. in inducing small stockholders to let go their holdings. One month before the day of the annual meeting Grant & Co. owned or had proxies for ninety-nine thousand, five hundred shares and went into the open market to buy five hundred and one shares at any price.

The stock soared, but no securities came out. A number of foolish traders ventured to sell short and in endeavoring to cover forced the stock still higher, revealing to Speaks what he was up against. Characteristically he had gone to Grant and endeavored to bluff him. Grant laughed in his face.

He then suggested joint control, admitting that he was shy a few shares of control and telling Grant exactly what the banker was holding.

"I wouldn't dream of being in joint control of any enterprise with you, Speaks," said Grant contemptuously.

"Very well," said the Black Devil, grinning maliciously. "I know where the outstanding securities are hidden and you don't. I'll have them by meeting day and elect my officers, after which I'll see that you'll have to sell your holdings for a tenth of what you paid for them."

"Go as far as you like," said Grant with a shrug.

While he was a multimillionaire, Grant didn't like to lose money any more than the next man and his humiliation would be great if Speaks beat him in the new struggle for the M. W. and Coast Railroad. Like Speaks, he had a list of the registered owners of the stock, but there were several thousand shares which were not registered and whose ownership could not be traced. Most of these he had picked up from brokers in the open market, but one thousand shares were unaccounted for. Of these he needed five hundred and one.

He located them upon the day that Speaks set Cook upon the trail of Reginald Blake. The house of Grant & Co. had ramifications in every bank in New York City and as soon as Wall Street learned that Grant had entered the lists against the hated Speaks for control of the road, an officer of the trust department of the Mammoth Bank sent word to William Fields in Grant's office that a thousand shares had been accumulating dividends there for five years in the interests of the son of the late Reginald Blake.

While Reggie was still in Randy

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Cook's office, John Grant was reading a copy of the trust agreement and smiling contentedly as he learned that Blake would come into possession of his securities before the annual meeting.

"Find the boy," he said to Fields. "When poor old Blake arranged this trust as a surprise to his boy on his twenty-fifth birthday, he didn't dream that he would be filling a suicide's grave and the boy would be penniless when the trust matured. I don't think we'll have any trouble buying the stock from young Blake, or, at least, securing his proxy. He knows what Speaks did to his father."

"It's a cinch," agreed Fields. "I'll send Van Storm after him. Young Blake was engaged to his daughter Rita, I believe. I suppose the engagement is still on because I saw the girl at a dinner last night and she was wearing an engagement ring."

They called in Van Storm, who was second vice president, and explained the situation to him. Van Storm was a trim little man with a small Vandyke beard, who was almost foppishly dressed and rather fussy. He was a wizard at details, which explained why he had a small interest in the firm of Grant & Co.

"What do you want to pay him?" he demanded. "Looks to me as though he had the whip hand in this situation."

"The stock has been up to a hundred and twenty until a week ago when both Speaks and myself learned there was no more to be had. It has dropped to seventy. I'll take his thousand shares off his hands at two hundred."

"Cheap at the price," said Van Storm, smiling. "It's worth a million to us or to Speaks."

"Oh, if there were competition, yes, but he wouldn't deal with Speaks. However, if necessary, I'll spend a million to get control of forty millions. And we owe the boy something. Our firm ought to have jumped in and supported his father. Go after him."

"Right," said Eric Van Storm.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE ABOUT-FACE.

WITH his strong jaw firmly set and determination in his eye, Reggie Blake rang the bell at Rita Van Storm's house at nine o'clock that evening. Through a guarded questioning of the Van Storm butler over the telephone he had learned that she was dining at home. Following the example of Ruth Stickney Speaks, he was about to do something which he had sworn never to do. And if Ruth had broken her vow for Reggie, he was seeing Rita once more because of Ruth.

The hue and cry was out. Mrs. Chase, the landlady of the lodging house where Ruth had been living, had told the police and the reporters what she knew. More than she knew, as a matter of fact. Mrs. Chase was an ex-actress with an evil tongue. She had seen Ruth in the company of Art Hornsman only once, but she had expanded that to many times and she informed the police and reporters that the girl was the "sweetie" of the gangster. The late afternoon papers carried the story.

When Ruth had vanished from the house without informing the landlady that she was leaving, she had, inadvertently lent color to the theory which the newspaper men had manufactured. The killing of Hornsman was a *crime passionel,* as the French would put it. Hornsman had been slain by a rival

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lover of Ruth Stickney, the chorus girl. In all probability, like a primitive woman, she had witnessed the murder and cheered on the killer. Anyway, she was wanted by the police and the city was being scoured for her.

The protective instinct, latent in every man, was roused in Reggie Blake. Somewhere, the frightened little creature was hiding. He must find her and help her. The thing to do was to have her leave New York until the affair blew over. Either that or for him to step forward and confess to the police that he had killed Hornsman in self-defense.

But Ruth had done everything in her power to prevent him from being connected with the crime. She had warned him that he had not only the police, but the vengeance of gangsters to fear. As surely as he surrendered she would come forward to testify for him and the white light of notoriety would beat pitilessly down upon her.

No, she must get away and he had to help her. But Ruth was penniless and he was not in much better case. She would need money, much money. And this afternoon he had turned down fifty thousand dollars. If he had known that Ruth had been involved in the murder case by the landlady he would have accepted Cook's offer, though it did come indirectly from his mortal enemy. In the morning he would go back and tell Cook he would accept. But by morning it might be too late to help Ruth.

If he could only get hold of a few thousand dollars!

Borrow it? Possibly, though he hated the thought, and it was doubtful if he could locate even one of his former friends who would lend him a large sum on short notice. Yet in some way he would have to find Ruth tonight and give her a roll of big bills and help her get out of town.

And then he thought of Rita Van Storm. That cold-blooded and mercenary girl had in her possession a ring worth three thousand dollars, which morally belonged to him. He could pawn the ring for a thousand, which would be enough for the time being, get it out later and sell it and send the proceeds to Ruth.

False idiotic pride had prevented him from taking back his ring when it was offered, but Rita had not urged him much. Knowing that he was penniless, she had slipped the equivalent of three thousand dollars back on her finger, and probably laughed at him behind his back.

Well, he would call on Rita and ask for the ring. He didn't care how much she despised him; he had more important things than her feelings toward him to think about. In holding the ring, she had violated the ethics of decency and he didn't think she would have the effrontery to refuse to return it if he stood in front of her and demanded it. Anyway, it was the only hope he had and anxiety for Ruth made him indifferent to Rita's contempt.

If he phoned Rita for an appointment she was likely to plead another engagement so he phoned her house without giving his name. A servant told him that she was out but would be home to dinner. He waited impatiently until nine when he knew that, even in the fashionable Van Storm household, dinner would be over, then presented himself unannounced.

THE butler opened the door and looked surprised and pleased. In the past Reggie had tipped liberally.

"Yes, Mr. Blake. Miss Rita is at

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home. Certainly, sir. I'll tell her you are here. Step into the drawing room, sir."

Reggie had hardly seated himself when he heard a glad cry in the hallway and a second later Rita Van Storm rushed into the room. Her eyes were shining with delight and her pretty mouth was wreathed in a happy smile.

"Oh, Reggie, you darling," she exclaimed, "it's so marvelous to see you!"

He rose politely and was almost bowled over, for she launched herself upon him, threw her beautiful white arms around his neck and pressed her soft painted lips to his with an ardor which astounded him. She had never kissed him like that before.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "You bad boy, I've been desolate."

Resolutely he removed her arms from his shoulders.

"Considering the circumstances of our last meeting, did you expect to see me?" he demanded coldly.

Her lovely blue eyes filled with tears. "Of course I didn't mean a word I said that day, darling," she declared. "I was a wretch. I don't know what possessed me. I called you that night everywhere that I thought you might be found and I've been making inquiries everywhere since. You vanished as though into thin air."

Reggie began to feel clammy and cold. He had an apprehension that something terrible was going to happen. He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. "What did you want to see me about?" he stammered.

"To tell you, of course, that I had been out of my mind, that I was insane to treat the man I loved the way I did. That I didn't care how long we had to wait and I'd marry you if you never made any money."

"Oh!" said Reggie most miserably.

"My only consolation was that I still had your ring," she said gleefully. "That still bound me to you. And I knew you would have to come back. I knew how you loved me. You wouldn't abandon me."

A cold wrath was slowly taking possession of him.

"Just a minute," he said sharply. "You chucked me in the most cold-blooded fashion. You broke the engagement without the slightest compunction. Are you trying to make me believe that you love me?"

"Of course, you silly boy," she declared with a radiant smile. "You ought to know better than to pay any attention to what a woman says. You caught me in a blue mood. I felt I would die if we had to wait a long time before we were married. I've always been terrified of poverty and I shuddered to think that we were poor. I just went out of my head. But no sooner had you gone than I realized that you were the only man I ever loved or ever could love, and I would be happier with you in a garret than in a palace with somebody else."

"Oh!" gasped Reggie.

"But everything is all right," she cooed. "You have come back to me. And nothing matters. Oh, Reggie, I'm so happy. Kiss me."

He kissed her.

"How cold you are," she complained. "But I'll warm you up. I know my heart now. I'll marry you to-morrow, Reg, if you say so."

He laughed mirthlessly. "I haven't got money enough to pay the minister," he muttered.

She laughed gayly. "Well, we'll wait a little while. I have confidence

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in you, dear. I know our future will be bright."

SHE dragged him down beside her on a divan. She was in white evening clothes with a superb expanse of bare back and shoulders. Never had he seen her so brilliantly beautiful. And he now knew positively that he didn't love her and never had loved her and he certainly didn't want to marry her. He had never been so uncomfortable and so unhappy in his life.

"Say something, dear," she pleaded.

"You're all excited, Rita," he protested, "and you are not thinking clearly. Things are as they were the last time you saw me, only worse. I was hopeful, then, that I would climb right along up in the world and now I know that I won't. I wasn't trained to earn my living and I've made a botch of my efforts. I couldn't support you in a two-room flat. I can't support myself. Our engagement was broken by you in a mood of cold common sense. You were perfectly right."

"I wasn't. I was crazy. I'm sane now. You are all that matters."

"I won't be able to support you decently before I'm sixty years old, if then, and I would hate myself for dragging you into poverty. So, the engagement remains broken."

"No," said Rita. "I refuse to permit it."

"You can't help yourself," he said firmly.

She bit her lip and color flamed in her cheeks. She was about to make a sharp answer, but controlled herself.

"All right," she said finally. "Then I'll have to wait for you. I'll wait ten years if necessary. I've got you back and I won't let you go."

"Darn it, Rita," he said unhappily, "you've got to."

"We are engaged," she said firmly, "and we'll be married when you are in a position to support a wife. That's the kind of girl I really am."

"Rita, dear!" He was much moved, for he felt he had enormously misjudged the girl and he was overcome with repentance. "You are perfectly wonderful and I am proud that you feel that way about me, but you greatly overestimate me as a man and I'm going to prove it to you. Do you know why I came here to-night?"

"To see me," she said, smiling archly.

"Yes, but why? I came to ask you —that is—er—I'm so broke, I wanted you to give me back the engagement ring. I want to sell it and use the money to live on."

"Oh!" said Rita, shocked.

He nodded. He was mute with humiliation.

She drew the ring from her finger with an eloquent gesture.

"I give it to you as our engagement ring," she said. "Pawn it. Don't sell it. Some day we will redeem it. But our engagement continues, dear. You will marry me when you think you can support me."

Miserable, undecided, Reggie covered his face with his hands. Tears were in his eyes.

She dropped the ring into his breast pocket.

"Go now, dear," she breathed. "There is nothing to be ashamed of. You'll win out and I'll be waiting for you."

"God bless you," he said brokenly.

RITA kissed his forehead and ran from the room. With a deep sigh he rose and walked unsteadily out of the house. When the door closed behind him, Rita went into the dining

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room where her father and mother were still sitting with their coffee. She wore a triumphant smile.

"Well," she said, "I put it over. The engagement is on again. He thinks I am the most generous girl in the world."

"Good work, Rita," said Eric Van Storm. "I was afraid the affair was ruptured beyond repair. He'll get a million for his securities, not a great fortune nowadays, but it's nothing to be sneezed at."

"Where's your ring?" asked Mrs. Van Storm. She was a thin, hard, but aristocratic-looking woman.

Rita's smile faded. "I gave it back to him," she said regretfully. "Why do you suppose he called this evening of all evenings? Because the poor boy is flat broke and he wanted me to return the ring so he could pawn it!"

"Eh?" exclaimed Van Storm. "In that case maybe I could make a private deal with him and—"

"Stop right where you are," cried Rita angrily. "Reggie gets his million. What do you suppose I am marrying him for?"

"Because you love him," said the father sarcastically.

"Well, I do," she said defiantly. "He's a fine boy. But I couldn't live on a cent less than the income of a million dollars."

"You are perfectly right," said her mother. "When we get you off our hands we'll make out quite nicely upon our own forty thousand a year. Won't we, Eric?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Van Storm grumpily. "Where is the boy living?"

"Why, I don't know; it never occurred to me to ask him."

"Good heavens! Where am I to find him?"

"Oh, he'll call again to-morrow, no doubt. Look here, father, it won't do for you to tell him about this trust fund."

"Why not?"

Rita had the grace to blush. "Well, I was pretty brutal when I broke our engagement, and I had to do a lot of talking to convince him that I was sincere in wishing to continue it. I said I didn't care if he didn't have a penny. I offered to marry him to-morrow."

Van Storm smiled. "Well, you wouldn't be taking any chance at that."

"But don't you see that he will jump to the conclusion that I knew all about his inheritance if you call him in and offer to buy the securities that are going to be turned over to him? He will believe me more mercenary than ever and he will insist upon breaking the engagement."

"I hadn't thought of that," said the worthy father. "Well, I'll turn the job over to somebody in the office. He isn't going to refuse a million for a hundred thousand dollars' worth of stock."

"Certainly not. He may consult me about the offer, and I will persuade him to accept it."

"Eventually it will come out that Grant has bought them, and he knows I am in Grant's firm. That will make him suspicious."

Rita smiled confidently. "Give me a week or so to work with that boy and he won't suspect anything."

"Well," said Van Storm with a shrug, "get his address to-morrow when he calls, and I'll send a good man around to see him."

REGGIE BLAKE, meanwhile, was walking the streets in a daze. He knew that he ought to be overjoyed to learn that Rita was true blue. He was filled with contrition at having

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misjudged her and all women of her class. Rita, to-night, was a warm, passionate, generous girl. Never before, not even when he asked her to marry him and she consented, had she displayed such depths to her nature. She loved him unselfishly and devotedly. Why, her offer to marry him immediately and share his miserable lot was sublime; a man had no right to expect any woman's affection to go as far as that. He ought to be proud and happy that Rita had redeemed herself, but he wasn't. He was miserable.

As an honorable man, he could not break the engagement to which she now clung so ardently. He and Rita Van Storm were tied together again, and some day he would have to marry her, and he didn't want to. It must be that he had never loved Rita, because he certainly didn't love her now. Her vivid beauty did not thrill him any more, her kisses did not awaken in him a spark of passion. Even the revelation of her admirable qualities left him cold.

She had broken the engagement and kept the engagement ring. Now she had returned the ring and kept the engagement. In accepting it he had been forced to renew his pledges to her. It meant—what did it mean? Well, it meant the end of everything between him and Ruth Stickney.

But there was nothing between him and Ruth. He had met her only twice. So far as he knew, she only considered him as a new friend. True, they had passed through a harrowing experience together, but nothing sentimental had transpired. He would be doing Ruth no wrong if he kept his pledge to Rita Van Storm. Only, the eloquent brown eyes and the sweet little face of Ruth kept floating before him, and he was perfectly aware that he cared more for her little finger than for all of Rita's beautiful body.

Anyway, he had in his pocket the equivalent of cash which would insure Ruth's safety, provided he could find her. He wouldn't hesitate to pawn the token which he had given one woman for the sake of another.

He took a taxi back to the West Side. Visits to two pawnshops which were open at that hour convinced him that it would be folly to pawn the ring that night, for the most he was offered was a couple of hundred dollars. He knew that he could pledge it in a reputable place for at least twelve hundred, and if he decided to sell it he could get at least twenty-five hundred. The thing to do was to wait until morning and take it down town. Anyway, he hadn't the slightest idea where to look for Ruth. The police would probably find her before he did, in which case the proceeds of the ring would be needed for bail, assuming that they admitted her to bail.

Depressed in spirits, he returned to his lodgings, half hoping that Ruth might have telephoned him. There was a scrap of paper thrust under his door. It was a request for him to call Park 3-0789.

Ruth!

He rushed downstairs to the telephone and called the number. A man's voice answered.

"Did somebody there call River 2-0924?" Reggie asked excitedly.

"Who are you?" asked the man curtly.

"Who is this speaking?"

"This is T. F. Speaks."

"Oh, it is, is it? Well, Mr. T. F. Speaks, you can go to the devil."

He hung up with a bang. So, Speaks, after Reggie had repulsed his jackal, had the insolence to wish to

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talk personally to the son of Reginald Blake. It was a cinch he wouldn't try again.

CHAPTER XIV.

ARISTIDES MEETS A GANGSTER.

ARISTIDES LAMONT was doing a rushing business at the corner of Broadway and Seventy-fourth Street at eight forty-five in the evening. He had discarded the Miracle Cleaner and the Silver Plater for a marvelous preparation which would cure a corn by an application upon the outside of the shoe of the sufferer, and not only did it effect instant relief but it did not spoil the gloss of the shoe.

He had two shills in the crowd, a man and a woman; for when Aristides was in funds he knew where to go to find assistants, and he was dividing between them ten per cent of his takings, a much more advantageous arrangement than he had made with Reggie Blake.

As he passed over his little bottles and took in his fifty-cent pieces he looked like a benevolent old Buddha, and the twinkle in his eye came from the renewed demonstration of his conviction that people preferred to be hoodwinked than to be benefited.

The more preposterous his claims and the more absurd the article he was selling, the more eager the public was to believe. Aristides knew from experience that it was difficult to sell a meritorious article, but a cinch to put over a useless one. Men and women rubbed the varnish from his little bottle upon the protuberance in their shoes which marked the corn and proclaimed that they felt relief. By the time their self-hypnotism had worn off he would be working another corner.

His pockets were heavy with half dollars. One week of this sort of business and he would be equipped with ample funds to start on the road in a big way.

At the end of five or six minutes he folded his new pitch table, leaving several prospective customers disappointed, and moved rapidly on his way. If he waited a minute longer he would have been assailed by demands of those who had already purchased for the return of their money. He swung down a side street, and became aware that a stranger was at his heels. Holdup, maybe, and Aristides was unarmed. Under no circumstances would he ever carry a weapon.

"Wait a minute, mister," said the man.

Aristides swung about and faced him. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"A little bit of info," said the other, "but I want straight goods."

"I sell nothing else," said Aristides with dignity.

"Yeah? I seen you last night working this neighborhood, mister."

"That is possible, my friend."

Aristides had sized the fellow up; he was a criminal.

"You had a young guy shilling for you and a skirt backing him up; good-looking moll."

"You are mistaken, sir."

"Like heck I'm mistaken. I seen you and him and the dame get together when the cop chased you on your way, and I seen you pay the guy off."

"You seem to observe a lot, young man."

"Now listen, you old faker," said the stranger. "We run this part of town, me and my pals, and we get all

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the gravy. We ain't got time to bother with small-time artists like you. Pick up your fifty-cent pieces and good luck to you so long as you don't butt in on us. Get me?"

"I seem to understand you," said Aristides reflectively.

"But when we tell you to come through with some info, you come through."

"VERY well," said Aristides. "You are correct in assuming that the young man was working for me, but the young lady was not. She was an acquaintance of his whom I never met before in my life."

"Now you're talking. We know who the dame was. What's the moniker of the guy and where does he flop?"

"Why are you interested?"

"That's not up your street. We want to talk to that guy."

"When you say we, are you speaking editorially or referring to yourself and others?"

"The mob I belong with, that's what I mean. Art Hornsman's gang."

"Meaning the person who was killed last evening, according to the newspapers?"

"Right."

"And you connect the man who shilled for me with this—er—lamentable incident?"

"Can the conversation. Who is he and where does he live?"

Aristides looked the man over sharply and did not like what he saw. The gangster was a modern development of which the pitch man did not in the least approve, but for which he had a healthful respect. He had encountered specimens in various cities and had met none so thoroughly disagreeable as this one.

"Unfortunately," he said mildly, "I cannot tell you. I found the young man broke, on a park bench, and made him a proposition. I did not ask his name and address, because I had no further need of him after that one night."

"Are you giving me a run around?" demanded the gangster.

"Not at all, my friend. The boy was down and out. I employed him for one evening, paid him off, and haven't thought about him since."

"And you don't know where he hangs out?"

"You might inspect the benches in Central Park," suggested Aristides blandly.

The fellow stared at him doubtfully, but the eyes of Mr. Lamont were mild and honest.

"All right. We'll find him and give him what he gave Art."

"You mean he killed your friend?" asked the pitch man, horrified.

"That's what we think."

"My, my! He didn't seem murderously inclined. Quite inoffensive. Why should he kill this Mr. Hornsman?"

"The moll belonged to Art, see! If you should run across him, you tip us off if you know what is good for you."

"It will be a pleasure. A murderer. Well, well! And how do I find you to tip you off?"

The gangster scribbled down the address of a speakeasy in the West Seventies. "Go there and tell the bartender. And you'll be tailed from now on, faker. Don't forget that." He turned on his heel and was lost in the crowd.

Aristides walked a few blocks up West End Avenue and returned to Broadway, where he resumed the sale of the Remarkable Corn Cure. He

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worked industriously and profitably until eleven-thirty, and was not too busy to notice that two shifty-looking individuals followed him from post to post and were not far behind when he started for his lodgings with his two assistants.

Having spent most of his life upon the fringe of the underworld, Aristides Lamont was an exponent of the virtues of minding one's own business, but he liked Reggie Blake even though the young man had refused to operate with him further, and he was certain that Reggie was not a killer. Furthermore, he had sized up the young woman who had been with Reggie when they split partnership, and he was confident that she was no gangster's moll.

He had seen Reggie, and no mention had been made of a brawl the night before, but it was unlikely Reggie would have dared confide in him if he had been mixed up in the Hornsman affair. However, whether or not young Blake was concerned in the death of Hornsman, he was in grave danger if he had awakened the suspicion of the gangsters, and he ought to be put on his guard.

On the other hand, life was sweet to Aristides, and he had no desire to intrude in the affairs of professional gunmen. He decided to sleep before he took any action.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DEVIL AND HIS DAUGHTER.

T. F. SPEAKS laid down the telephone with a smothered oath and returned to the living room, where his new-found daughter was at ease in a lounging chair.

"If I could get my hands on the dog who just called this number," he growled, "I'd squeeze his throat until he couldn't tell anybody to go to the devil."

"Did somebody say that to you?" asked Ruth mockingly. "It reminds me of our interview at the asylum years ago."

A wry grin cracked his saturnine countenance. "You had some justification, maybe," he said, "but here's a bird who called the wrong number, demanded my name and, when I told him, handed me that."

"Oh!" exclaimed Ruth.

"What did you say?"

"Just an exclamation of surprise," she replied.

She had called Reggie hours before, and dared not leave the name of Ruth Stickney with the person who had answered. Suppose it was Reggie who had called back? She knew he had a grudge against her father and, finding him on the line, he might have said something like that.

It had been a trying evening for Ruth. Her father had come home about six o'clock and sent the butler to say that dinner was at seven. She had put on a little dinner dress selected from half a dozen sent in by a modiste and descended with some trepidation. She was not afraid of her father—much; but she still disliked him, and she was looking forward to dinner as an ordeal.

They dined alone at a small table in the large dining room. The food was excellent and there was no wine, which did not irk her, because she was not accustomed to it. Speaks gave her a piercing scrutiny, grunted, did not rise as she seated herself, and for a time devoted himself to the plates set before him.

"How do you like this place?" he flung at her finally.

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"I think it's gorgeous, fa-father."

"Say," he boasted, "I could buy the finest house on Park Avenue. I could eat off gold plates, and drink champagne with every meal if I wanted to. I've got millions, Ruth, millions."

"So I've heard, sir."

"I'm not a miser, either. I just do not give a damn for fancy things. Give me a good bed, plain food, and I'm satisfied. I have my fun at the office."

She was silent.

"You're my daughter. You can have what you want. You don't like me much. That's all right. I don't know anything about you. Don't care. You say you've no entanglements. Fine. You're smart enough to know you're well off. Bet you realize you were a fool to run away four years ago. Don't you? Eh?"

"I'm not sorry I did. I've learned a lot in the last four years."

"Fine mess you made of it. Went around with gangsters. Got the police after you. Well, you'll behave yourself now. No nonsense. You've got a position to uphold. I won't have anybody sneering at T. F. Speaks's daughter."

"I don't think anybody will. Your reputation isn't so good, father, from gossip I hear around town."

"Yeah? No scandal about me. They talk about any man who plays the game down town. Dog eat dog down there. I'm the big dog."

"When you say 'behave,' what do you mean? Am I to be immured here?"

He laid down his knife and fork. "You can do what you like, in reason. Buy clothes and jewelry; buy automobiles. Make friends, the right kind of friends; no gigolos. I'll hire some old woman to chaperon you, so you can go places. I never go anywhere."

More silence. Her father was kindly according to his lights, she thought. A grim, solitary, unsocial man. While it served him right, he was rather to be pitied. And he expected no affection from her; was likely to repulse it if offered. He liked her because he thought she was as hard as himself.

Coffee came finally, and they returned to the apartment.

"NOW talk to me," Speaks commanded. "Tell me what you've been doing if you're not ashamed of it."

Very simply she told him the high lights of the past four years, and he listened gravely.

"You've got nerve," he said when she had finished. "Give you credit for that. Funny my detectives never found a trace of you. They'll get no more business from me. Now come through, young woman—who killed this Art Hornsman?"

"I—I don't know," she faltered.

"You're lying. The man was killed on your doorstep. You've hated me for years, and it took a big shock to send you to me. You were there when he was killed, and you know who shot him. Afraid of being questioned for fear you would betray some one. A lover, most likely. Come through, Ruth."

"I told you everything," she repeated, but her voice shook.

"Your boy friend killed Hornsman. That rat deserved to be killed. I'm not interested in turning up the killer, but I want to know who is the other gangster."

"He's not a gangster, and he didn't kill him," cried the girl.

"Well, how did it happen? To protect you I have to have the truth," he said sharply.

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"It—it was an accident. Hornsman struck at him, and Reggie knocked him down."

"Reggie who?"

"I can't tell you that."

"You'll tell me or I'll send the police after this Reggie. They'll find out his last name quickly enough."

"You—you wouldn't do that, father?"

"You bet your life I would. Suppose I'm going to have some weasel from the underworld dogging my daughter's footsteps?"

"He isn't a weasel from the underworld," she said hysterically. "He is a gentleman. Hornsman pulled a gun on him, and while they were struggling for it, it went off and killed Hornsman."

Speaks rose and stood over his shrinking daughter. "His name! If he is a gentleman I'll take no action against him, but, by the Lord, you'll have to prove it!"

"Very well," said Ruth, "I'll hold you to that, and I'll tell you. His name is Reggie Blake, and I believe you knew his father."

"Reginald Blake!" shouted Speaks. "I'll say I knew his father! And that's the man who killed Hornsman?"

"He didn't kill him, I tell you," screamed the girl.

Speaks grinned sardonically. "He would have a tough time proving that if the police laid hands on him. So you're in love with Reginald Blake, Junior, eh?"

"No, I'm not in love with him. I—er—like him."

Speaks pinched his left ear, an indication that he was pleased, as his private secretary could have informed Ruth.

"Well, well," he said. "Young Blake isn't so bad at that. How did he get away from the scene of the crime?"

Having confided so much, there was nothing for Ruth to do but to tell everything. The gleam in Speaks's eye while she talked, puzzled her.

"How did you make the acquaintance of Blake?" he demanded.

She told him.

"Down and out, eh?" he muttered. "Does he know you are my daughter?"

"Yes."

"And he advised you to come to me, eh?"

"No. I told him that nothing would induce me to go to you."

"But when you realized that they might force you to peach on him, you made the big decision. That it?"

"Yes," she reluctantly admitted.

"Then I have Blake to thank for restoring my long-lost daughter. I would like to see him and thank him."

The tone in which he said that chilled Ruth, and she eyed her parent with distrust.

"You are not going to betray him," she pleaded. "I—I won't stay here. I'll run away again if you do."

"I won't turn him over to the police," said Speaks grimly. "Not at all. On the contrary, I'll reward him. I'll put him on his feet. I'll give him fifty thousand dollars."

"Really, father?" she cried joyfully. "Do you mean it?"

"I'll give him my check for fifty thousand dollars."

Her face fell. "He wouldn't accept it. He is very proud. He says you ruined his father."

Speaks's face grew black. "His father was a pompous old ass. I fought him for control of a railroad, licked him, made him a fair proposition, and he replied with insults. Now you tell

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me where to get hold of the boy and I'll do my best to square things. What is his address?"

RUTH thought fast. Fifty thousand dollars would be a godsend to Reggie, and he must be induced to accept it; but she must see him and prepare him. Her father had a terrible temper and, unless Reggie was tactful, the deal would fall through. Reggie must be cajoled and coached.

"General delivery, New York Post Office," she replied mendaciously.

"Oh, that. Well, write him to call on you some evening. I'll have a nice, pleasant chat with him."

"Father," said Ruth gratefully, "I believe you're good."

"Who, me?" Speaks looked astonished. "I'm pretty hard-boiled; but, after all, I've nothing against this kid. Wait till I answer the phone."

Conversation languished after the phone call, and Ruth yawned.

"Do you mind if I go to bed?" she asked. "I didn't sleep last night."

He nodded. "Go ahead. Drop a line to Blake before you turn in. Don't say I want to see him. Don't even tell him you are with me. Make an engagement to meet him in some hotel, say tomorrow night. I'll be there."

She looked at him dubiously, hesitated. "Well, good night, father," she said uncertainly. Did he expect her to kiss him good night? She couldn't.

But Speaks already had mentally dismissed her. His saturnine face was set and his lips were moving.

Quietly Ruth withdrew.

"Right into my hands, bound hand and foot," Speaks was saying to himself. "Son just like the father. He'll sign over everything or go to the chair for the murder of Art Hornsman."

After half an hour he went to the phone and called Randy Cook.

"I'll take care of young Blake," he said. "Lay off."

"Too late," replied Cook. "He's out of the way."

"Eh? Are you sure?"

"Just had a report."

"All right," said T. F. Speaks. "I don't know but I prefer it that way. Good night."

A half-formed project was instantly discarded by T. F. Speaks. For a moment he had considered marrying his daughter to the son of Reginald Blake. There was no better-connected family socially in New York than the Blakes, and it would be a triumph to make people accept his Ruth even if they had no use for T. F. Speaks. However, the thing wasn't practical for several reasons.

First of all, young Blake considered that Speaks had killed his father, and undoubtedly hated him like poison. Second, while it was obvious that Ruth was interested in Blake, she was not the type who would seriously appeal to Reginald Blake's son with his inheritance of snobbery. Young Blake might have been willing to play around with her, but his kind didn't fall in love with working girls. Of course he might have been coerced to forget his rancor against the father and accept the daughter with her great fortune, but it was better this way.

Speaks liked the notion of picking up Reggie's thousand shares of M. W. and Coast Railroad via the Benefit Society of which he was the honored president and secretary. Anyway, he had given Cook his orders and could not criticize him for carrying them out. And, when he got around to it, he would marry Ruth to an English duke.

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It was characteristic of him that he wasted no thought upon the distress Ruth would feel when she learned that young Blake had been murdered. She might feel badly for a day or two, but she could buy a lot of things and forget it. He would walk into the board room of the railroad at the annual meeting and kick Grant and his gang out.

Very contentedly he went to his desk and was soon adding up long columns of figures. He worked far into the night.

CHAPTER XVI.

TAKEN FOR A RIDE.

REGGIE BLAKE, after hanging up the telephone, climbed the stairs to the second floor, pushed open his room door and entered. He fumbled for the light switch, turned on the single bulb, and heard a slight movement beside him.

He uttered a startled exclamation, and then a heavy instrument crashed down upon his head and he crumpled to the floor. He was not out for more than a second or two, but he was dazed and able to offer no resistance to two men who had pulled a sack over his feet and then jammed him into it. When they were fastening the thing he began to struggle, but a second blow sent him back into oblivion.

"Open the window," commanded one of the two men who had been hidden in his room. "We'll drop him out and pick him up afterward."

"Aw, what's the idea?" protested the other. "Bust in his skull."

"You do what you're told," snarled the leader. "Get hold of him. He's heavy. Better lower him. He'd make too much noise if we dropped him."

There was six feet of clothes line on the end of the sack which they lowered to that extent and then let go. Reggie dropped five feet and fell into a pool of mud and water. He did not come back to consciousness. The two visitors left the room by the simple process of descending the stairs and going out the front door.

A few minutes later they appeared at the back of the house, picked up the sack, and carried it out of the yard with much grunting and grumbling. Reggie Blake weighed a hundred and eighty pounds.

As they unfastened the back gate a light, covered truck drove down the alley. They crossed town rapidly and in ten minutes entered a street which ended abruptly at the East River. On the right-hand side was a coal wharf whose watchman was opening the gate as the truck appeared at the head of the street.

The truck drove right in and ran down upon an old and dilapidated pier. The driver had switched off the lights and there was no illumination on the wharf. The three men descended, went to the rear of the truck, pulled out sack and contents, let it thump upon the planking, and then lazily rolled it to the edge of the pier and pushed it off. They heard a splash, grunted with satisfaction, returned to the truck and drove away.

Five minutes later Randy Cook received a telephone message, and hardly had the gangster hung up, when T. F. Speaks called him on the phone. It was a source of great satisfaction to Randy Cook to be able to tell his employer that the job was done.

The visit of Reggie Blake to his office had complicated matters for Mr. Cook in one way, though it had simplified them in another. He had learned

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where Blake resided, which was excellent, but an investigation by the police might cause the visit to leak out, which would be annoying.

Being an astute lawyer, Randolph Cook studied everything very carefully before he took action, and he was the more careful as he had a lurid past which yearned to remain buried.

While Reginald Blake, Jr., alive was a down-and-outer of no interest to anybody, Reginald Blake, Jr., dead would interest New York tremendously. The police would want to know who would benefit by his death.

Immediately the Mammoth Trust Company would reveal that a block of a thousand shares of M. W. and Coast Railroad was to have been turned over to young Blake and must now go to the railroad Benefit Society. T. F. Speaks as president and treasurer would be under suspicion and his attorney with him. Speaks had not considered that angle when he ordered Cook to buy up or eliminate Blake, but Randy Cook gave it every consideration.

Therefore the shooting or stabbing of Reggie Blake was not to be considered. Cook had found a way.

Two men hidden in his room would knock out Reggie Blake. They would put him in a weighted sack and they would drop the sack into the East River at a spot where there was no current, due to a certain formation of the river bed. Before morning the sack would be fished up by Cook's men and disposed of, while its drowned occupant would be brought ashore. Thus the body would be available for proof of death.

It would be assumed that Blake, despondent, had committed suicide, as no marks of any consequence would be found upon him. And, if the suicide theory was doubted, it would be supposed that the young man had wandered toward the river front and had been attacked for the purpose of robbery and been pushed overboard.

That was the way Cook had worked it out, and so far it had worked well. Unlike Speaks, however, Cook could not dismiss the affair from his mind, and he was lying awake when his phone rang at four in the morning.

"Yes?" he said.

"He ain't there. We found the sack. It was torn open," said a voice.

"It isn't possible. Look again."

"He got away, all right. It ain't our fault," said the unknown on the other end. "That's all, mister." He hung up.

REGGIE was conscious when they pushed him off the edge of the dock, and he moaned feebly as he dropped. His progress was halted by a sudden jerk which jarred him from head to foot and he became aware that the lower part of his body was immersed in icy water, the effect of which was to restore to him the use of all his faculties.

He was in a sack and he was up to his chest in water, that was evident, but where he was, or why, he was unable to understand. He had been set upon in his room, knocked out, and pushed into this bag. He had a dim recollection of falling from a height and then rumbling in some vehicle across the city. And they had dumped him out of the vehicle upon a hard flooring, rolled him over and pushed him off into water. He could breathe in the sack, but he was congealing with the cold of the water.

He shouted for help, but heard no response, and he began to thrash desperately around in his cloth prison. The bag began to swing. It was sus-

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pended from something. He thumped against the pier and uttered a cry of pain. A sharp object had stabbed him in the thigh.

He felt for it and encountered the point of a huge spike which had penetrated the bag a foot below the water. That was all he needed. Industriously he began to enlarge the hole made by the point of the spike which protruded from the pile against which he had struck when he set the bag swinging. Fortunately for him, he was not in a canvas bag, but one of burlap, which, once torn, yielded rapidly. In a few moments he had a six-inch rent in it, and this rapidly enlarged. He tore viciously with both hands, ripped it up to its mouth, which was tightly fastened, and thrust out his head.

To his horror, he discovered that he was in the river. His sack was hanging from a huge hook several feet above his head, having caught there by means of the rope which his captors had looped for convenience in transporting him. When they rolled him off the dock, the rope had providentially fallen over the hook with the result that the sack had been checked before it was completely submerged beneath the surface of the river.

He had already become aware that there was some hard heavy object beneath his feet. The sack was weighted.

Sick with horror, Reggie remained inactive for a moment, and then the thought that his murderers might discover that they had not completed the job supplied him with energy. He ripped savagely, got shoulders and half of his body out of the sack—then lost his balance and fell into the water.

He struck out wildly and one of his feet touched bottom. It was not much more than four feet deep in this spot. Why pick out a shallow place in which to drown a man, he wondered?—not being aware that the recovery of his body was essential to the plan of the eminent lawyer, Randolph Cook.

The floor of the pier was six feet above his head, and he tried to clamber up upon the piles, but they were slimy and slippery. At any moment he might be found by the men who had thrown him overboard. Better move along some distance and be out of the way.

He moved cautiously twenty feet, thirty, and suddenly he found himself in deep water and had to strike out lustily. Inadvertently he swam away from the pier. There was a faint illumination from the lights of the Fifty-ninth Street bridge, some blocks north and a hundred feet in the air, and he scanned the dock structure anxiously for the sight of a ladder or a rope up which he could clamber.

Suddenly he realized that the dock was fading from sight. He swam vigorously toward it, but without avail. He was in the grip of the wicked East River current and was being dragged out into the center of the stream. And the current was trying to pull him under. His boots and his coat were dragging him down, too.

He swung out of his coat without difficulty, but went a foot below the surface when he drew up his right foot and fumbled with his shoe. He was almost drowned before he got both feet free, but he won out, and was able to swim better. He was in the center of the river and there was a tug approaching. He shouted. The tug passed without paying him the slightest attention, although he was only thirty feet from it. He was being carried down the river rapidly; and he was freezing and fast tiring.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

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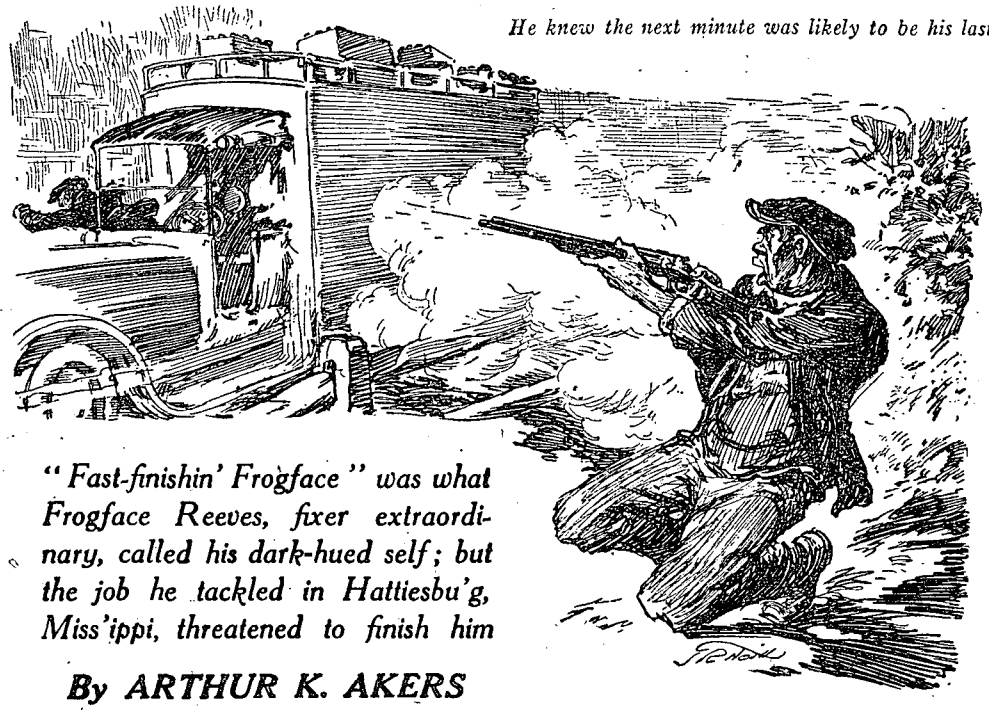
Liquid Assets



He knew the next minute was likely to be his last

"Fast-finishin' Frogface" was what Frogface Reeves, fixer extraordinary, called his dark-hued self; but the job he tackled in Hattiesbu'g, Miss'ippi, threatened to finish him

By ARTHUR K. AKERS

"TELLS you all time I's somep'n! Look here whut de mail-man done bring me," the corpulent "Frogface" Reeves, gentleman of color, interrupted his undersized satellite, Marmaduke Brown, in his task of sweeping out their place of business over a pool room. "Ain't nobody never write *you* nothin' like dis! Got *be* somebody befo' you gits dis kind of letter."

"Ain't itchin' to git prominent till de dust settle some, whut dat Vicksbu'g gal stir up about me wid dem britches-of-promise bus'ness." Marmaduke kept on with his broom.

"You done put yo' foot in it, dar. Dat's a fact. Stayin' away from Vicksbu'g and layin' low is liable to do you mo' good dan a meal of eatin'-victuals, way you is done gummed yo'self up wid dat gal! Cain't see whut de women sees in you, boy: you ain't got no looks, nor no size, nor no clothes, nor no sense—"

"Ain't got no big mouth, neither; all time bellerin' around whut a big man I is," retorted the overalled Marmaduke truculently. "Go on—read me whut in de letter, like you itchin' to do, nohow."

"It from Cephas Jones—he de 'Big Nigger' in Hattiesbu'g now—"

"Sees a dark man bringin' you trouble."

"You ain't see nothin'! Dat's how come you ain't never amount to nothin'. Brains keeps me out of trouble—jes' like not havin' none git you in all dat jam over in Vicksbu'g. Cephas done hear about me 'way over here. Dat how come he writ me. He say he

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got a big job fo' me whut ain't none dem Hattiesbu'g niggers able to 'tend to fo' him—"

"Maybe dem boys got too much sense to mess wid it," Marmaduke put in.

"Shet up! Cephas say fo' me to be dar to-morrer, ready fo' bus'ness and all set to make myse'f a nice fat profit."

"Whut you gwine do 'bout yo' treas'rer's report, to de lodge to-night?"

"Eve'y time you opens yo' mouth you lets out dat you ain't no business man, Mammaduke! I got de lodge money right wid me. And I jes' tells de brothers I's out of town till next meetin' . . . Big bus'ness man always out of town when somep'n come up he ain't want to mess wid."

"Jes' tellin' you, de lodge about fed up wid way you treas'rers, dat's all . . ."

"Yeah? Well, I's so fed up I's done got indigestion wid way you all-time slippin' dem janitor-sized notions of yourn into my bus'ness. Us leaves fo' Hattiesbu'g, Miss'ippi, in de evenin' now, and dat's all."

"Us?"

"Us. Me to do de brain-work, and you to tote de baggage and be my pussonal janitor, around. I show dem Hattiesbu'g niggers whut class look like! And you quit pickin' up cig'rette butts from de gutter, too, while us dar."

"HATTIESBURG! All out for Hattiesburg!" The train was slap-slapping past box cars in the yards next morning, slowing for the station.

"Git you' shoes on, Mammaduke, and rally yo'self 'round amongst de baggage!" A sartorially splendid Frogface flicked a dust-speck from his yellow shoes, buttoned a bright blue coat above his unpatched gray pants, and set his too-small derby at the latest angle on his bulbous head.

"Keep yo' shirt on!" responded his stunted assistant glumly. "Dis here lookin' mo' like a wild deuce chase to me all de time—"

"And remember to walk on de sidewalk, instead of gallopin' up de middle de street, like you done last time you gits in a big town." Frogface was severe.

"Got to leave myse'f room to run, does dat Vicksbu'g gal—"

"You ain't need to run. I's in charge now. Dat gal ain't here: dis ain't Vicksbu'g. Rally 'round dem suit-cases now. Head fo' de hotel! Cephas, us is came!"

But, some thirty minutes later, the important Mr. Cephas Jones seemed more impressive than impressionable.

"Unbulge dem eyes!" Frogface had hissed threateningly at his awed helper, as the organs mentioned took in the stenographer, the overstuffed furniture, the china bulldog, with which Cephas had dressed his outer office. "—And quit leavin' yo' mouth hang open like you ain't used to nothin' or nobuddy!"

"Sees you talkin' yo'self right into a jam in here," croaked Marmaduke. "I—"

But the stenographer interrupted him, telling that Mr. Jones would see them now.

Mr. Reeves had been looking for splendor, but not like this. Cephas had everything! Furniture, *two* cuspidors, striped suit, necktie of yelling yellow, and a fifty-dollar bill lying careless-like on the glass-topped desk before him.

An out-of-town boy would just

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naturally have to get started on his lying early to compete with this, Frogface realized. Cephas luckily provided an opening along that line:

"Whut dat wid you?" He indicated the Sunday-suited Marmaduke disapprovingly.

"Dat my 'sistant, Mammaduke Brown. Totes my baggage and press my pants. Say anything you wants to in front of him—he ain't und'stand it nohow."

"Well, dis here's mighty private bus'ness I sends fo' you on, Mist' Reeves. It's somep'n cain't jest *any*body be trusted wid. Dat how come I calls on you."

"Dey sends fo' me all over de country," admitted Mr. Reeves with equal impressiveness. "Is nobody got a mean job on hand, first thing dey thinks of is me. Ain't never gum up nothin'. Start me on it, and old job's jest same as finished."

Marmaduke's eyes rolled uneasily with fear of onrushing disaster. He had heard this line before. But Cephas seemed perfectly satisfied at the turn the conversation was taking.

"Dat whut dey tells me, Mist' Reeves," purred the big man. "Dat whut dey tells me! Knowed all time I was pickin' de right man. One whut ain't never lay down on no job—"

"'Fast-finishin' Frawgface,' dat's whut dey calls me all over Al'bama and Miss'ippi," conceded that gentleman modestly. "Once I spits on my hands, ain't nothin' turn me back!"

"Co'se dey ain't!" agreed Cephas enthusiastically. "Knowed it all de time—ain't nothin' stop you. Now, ain't but one mo' question, and us gits down to bus'ness: Is you got de money along to put up fo' good faith and show you ain't no doublecrosser? Also, yo' share of de quick profits from de liquid assets in de deal is based on de size of yo' partic'pation."

FROGFACE'S big front momentarily hit hard sledding among the big words and hard facts. Seven dollars and a half might not sound like big money to this big financier, but it was the size of Mr. Reeves's personal pile. And too much had already been said about Mr. Reeves's business importance.

Lightning hit Frogface. Kindly lightning, in the shape of a stunning idea. Cephas had said quick profits. And all anybody had to do was look at Cephas's shirt and suit to see that he never missed.

"How quick you say dem profits comin' in?"

"Next day. Dis bus'ness got a turnover like batter-cakes on a hot stove."

Frogface swelled. Everything was saved, then. Here was where his lodge cut a melon through having a business man for its treasurer. He would make them some real money overnight, and split the makings with them, ninety-ten. Ten per cent would be a swell return on their money for a one-night stand!

"Planks down hund'ed dollars, right out of my pants!" he volunteered.

Marmaduke instantly exhibited symptoms of having swallowed a coconut whole. At which display a shadow crossed the face of Mr. Reeves. Next time he carried on negotiations with a big financier, Marmaduke would stay hitched outside in the alley.

"Dat's de ticket! Makes a success out of eve'ything you tackles!" Mr. Jones raked in the initial investment toward him with an eagerness surprising in such a financier. "Makes you one-fo'th partner in de deal. And

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refunds when you brings in de—er—assets."

"Done spit on my hands! R'arin' to start!" Frogface encouraged.

"You posts yo'self on de Laurel Road, den, about five miles out, jest befo' one o'clock to-night, in place whut I shows you. Us fu'nish eve'ything. When you hears de truck—"

Several of Mr. Reeves's vital organs seemed suddenly to have gone on vacation, leaving an icy void behind them.

"Says *huh?*" he achieved through lips grown dry.

"Says you is in on hijacking a truck of liquor whut us knows is movin' south from here on de Laurel Road to-night. Us done got it sold here in town, though, soon as you brings it back in. You git yo' money den. Quick turn-over and fast profits, dat's us!"

Frogface puttered around weakly in his personal ruins.

"Means *I* hijacks truck of drinkin'-liquor—and brings hit back here, by myse'f?" he repeated thickly. Sounded like somebody else talking!

"Right. Then us takes de liquid assets off yo' hands and sells it, and pays off wid you proportionate. So you meets me back here at noontime, now, and I takes you out to de place, so you can find it all right to-night. It 'll be a big closed-in truck."

Marmaduke couldn't wait until they got around the first corner outside, it seemed, to begin summing up Frogface's business for him.

"Dar you is!" he burst out excitedly. "Bellerin' around again 'bout whut a big man you is! And now look at you! Done talked yo'se'f into startin' somep'n whut you cain't finish! And den sewed yo'se'f up in it wid a hundred dollars of de lodge's money, so you *cain't* quit now! Whichever way you turns now, you is looking right spang into de middle of a mess!"

Mr. Reeves pulled down his vest and tried to think up something scathing. This Marmaduke was beginning to sound too much like that lowest order of business life, a partner who is right. Wherefore Marmaduke must be put back into his place.

"Yeah?" he undertook this. "Who you think *you* is—talkin' about a mess? Whut you call dat jam you gits yo'se'f into wid dat gal over in Vicksbu'g, den? Now you quit sprainin' yo' brain, and 'tend to yo' bus'ness, which is he'pin' me. You done hear dat Cephas boy say dey sont fo' me becaze word is done got out eve'ywhar dat 'Frawgface fixes whar others fumbles.'"

"Dat gal in Vicksbu'g sont fo' me too—but I got too much sense to answer," quarreled Marmaduke. "Gimme my ticket home, too—ain't crave be even in same State wid dat gal."

"You stays here and press my pants, while I's gittin' de lay of de land around here—dat whut you does," instructed Mr. Reeves sharply. It always made him feel better to have a helper around to holler at.

ONCE let him get away from the depressing influence of Marmaduke, Frogface discovered, and a business man shot right back up to his proper size. For again, in the stimulating presence of Mr. Cephas Jones, things looked good. Also simple. All you did, it appeared, was fire a couple of rounds from a dark fence corner as the truck neared, wait until the sound of the driver's wide-spaced footsteps ceased echoing in the distance, and mount the truck seat for a profitable turn-around and turn-over. Result, the way Frogface had fixed it, the lodge

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made a little easy money, and the lodge's treasurer made a lot more. With everybody satisfied and nobody hurt.

Mr. Jones had outlined all the details, and even mentioned casually that the truck driver was a hardened character: it might take as many as three shots to dislodge him.

Well content with the way a scary-looking scheme at first was now developing, Mr. Reeves set his derby at a more acute angle, elevated the far end of his cigar, and strutted toward his hotel. Marmaduke was missing there, but the spare trousers were freshly pressed and waiting. Frogface donned them and set forth to spread sunshine.

The First National Pool Parlor looked like a good place to start; he had never seen the Volstead Act enforced all the way to the back door of places that bore a similar appearance. Nor had he more than got himself well inside its front doors, when he found that, as usual, his judgment was sound. On account of the girl there. High-yellow and easy to look at. Her back was toward him, but Frogface wasn't bashful.

"Whar you been all my life, Good-lookin'?" he enlarged the scope of his business and complicated his future.

"Go roll a goober-nut wid yo' nose, Big Boy!" advised his prospect.

At which he got a better look at her face, and congratulated himself some more on his judgment. Here *were* looks, marred only by a tiny scar beneath the point of her chin.

"Dat's right—kid me!" he guffawed, steering her toward a table. "Craves my liquor strong and my women wild! Whar at I comes from, gals like you follers me around, but I ain't pay 'em no mind. Hard to suit, and gittin' harder all de time, dat's me. And you suits me! Whar at dey keep de wild moose-milk in dis dump?"

The girl looked around her quickly; then:

"Right in de back," she murmured. "Whut yo' name, Big Boy? And walk easy."

"Dat's de ticket! Knowed you was a sport, minute I lays my bright blue eyes on you. Name's Reeves—Walter Reeves . . . Frawgface to dem whut loves me."

Again the girl looked around her. "Stand up on dem hind hoofs and walk, den—Frawgface!" She slid an arm around his waist. "Me and you gwine be friends, if ain't nothin' happen."

"Cain't nothin' happen nowhar till I says de word. De Big Boy sends fo' me to come over here and he'p put over big bus'ness deal. 'Fast-finishin' Frawgface,' dat's me! Whut yo' name, gal?"

"Name Lula—to you. And watch dat beer, boy. It takes de bark off of trees."

"Ain't keer if it take de bark off of dawgs," and he proved it. "Aims to circulate and converse. You looks better to me eve'y time I spatulates de foam!"

"You's beginnin' to look human yo' own self, Big Boy," admitted Lula above her fifth. "But I got to git gwine. No foolin'."

"To whar and fo' how long?"

"Look in here in de mawnin', Frawglegs. Maybe I be 'round!"

SHE slipped out the front door as, through a twelve-per-cent-alcoholic-content haze, Frogface saw the forms of two men entering at the rear. He drowned his sense of loss in two fresh ones.

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"Dar a gal whut's jest wasted on nobody cep'n me," he sized up the newest situation. "Ain't old Mammaduke's eyes stick out, is he see me wid her, settin' close!"

But one of the recent back-door entrants interrupted his rhapsody, slipping heavily into the chair opposite him, with a gruff, "Mawnin', brother!"

Frogface felt friendly. Here was an audience right when a boy felt like talking. And it wasn't right to blame anybody for their size and looks. If this newcomer took after a truck and a gorilla, respectively, in those two departments, it was all the more up to Frogface to be kind to the unfortunate.

"Lap yo'self up one?" he invited.

"Ain't keer if I do. Out most all night, nohow," accepted the gorilla-looking boy. "You live 'round here?"

"Naw. Jest over here in Miss'ippi on bus'ness. My name's Frawgface Reeves. 'Fast-finishin' Frawgface,' dey calls me heap of times, 'count of de way I does bus'ness. Sends fo' me from all over de country to 'tend to big deals."

The truck-sized boy seemed only partially impressed. "My name Carter," returned the newcomer glumly. "First name, Vacant."

"Pleased to meet wid you, Mist' Carter."

"Jest call me Vacant. Whut you-all doin' here in Hattiesbu'g, nohow?"

Frogface appreciated the opening. "He'pin' a good-lookin' gal to fall for me," he headlined. Then he launched into a description of the lady and her charms. The mentally muscle-bound Vacant lumbered after him.

"Gal like dat," concluded Mr. Reeves, "do herse'f heap of good tiein' up wid me."

Mr. Carter grasped the table-top. There was an ominous splintering sound as the table seemed more or less to fall apart beneath his grip.

"Whut you say dat gal's name was?" questioned Vacant.

"Name Lula. Couldn't hardly keep her hands off me!"

"Uh huh—Lula. And whut dat bus'ness you say you got 'tend to over here?"

This Vacant, realized Frogface, was responding to treatment now. Sure was getting interested in a boy's affairs! But that was the penalty of being nationally-known as 'Fast-finishing Frogface'! The beer, too, was urging a boy on to be sociable.

"Hijackin' old liquor truck," he divulged confidentially. "Dat jest between me and you, of co'se—"

"Sho!" Vacant's mind seemed to snap right off of Lula. He agreed to everything, if anything with a fresh access of interest. He had resumed his seat. "You and dat Lula gal gwine tie up, you says," he addressed Frogface. "And you gwine hijack liquor truck. Go on from right dar."

This was the best audience Frogface had had in a long time!

"Hides in fence-cawner to-night on de Laurel Road. 'Bout one o'clock. old truck comin' down de road licketty-split. I hauls off wid a gun and hijacks it. Den, jest as soon as de driver quits runnin'—"

"Co'se de driver'll run," put in Mr. Carter in perfect accord, seeing eye-to-eye.

"—I turns old truck around and fotches it back here into Hattiesbu'g aft' dat; and us sells de load and splits up de profits."

"Sounds like one dem Cephas jobs," admired the now thoroughly animated Vacant.

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"You said it!"

"Well, I see you later. Much 'bleeged fo' de beer."

VACANT was gone, but his last two sentences seemed to have a lot of meaning—particularly the first one. However, Frogface couldn't put his mind on it, not only because of the beer but because of the waiter. That skinny servitor followed Vacant's departure by coming around and talking financial.

"Three dollars is big as us lets a bill git befo' dey pays off," was the verbal check he presented.

"Dey tips boys more'n dat whar I comes from!" Frogface dived jovially for his remaining seven dollars and a half. He'd have plenty more in the morning—

He tried some more pockets, and a light cold sweat succeeded the fine glow of assurance that had been upon him since the second beer. An overweight proprietor and a second waiter seemed to recognize his symptoms, and drew nearer.

"S-s-somebody done git all my money!" gasped Mr. Reeves from the midst of a sudden personal and financial deflation. An awful suspicion was making things worse — that Lula hadn't been able to keep her hands off a boy!

"Gimme yo' watch, den, till you raise some!" The scowling proprietor appeared to have a regular routine for such occasions.

Two fumbles in that direction only made matters worse. "She gits dat too!" mourned the visiting big business man.

Which confession seemed like pressing a button somewhere. In no time there was a flying wedge in the First National, with the devastated Frogface at its apex. Worse, scarcely had he got over being sick on the curb without, while he tried to figure precisely when and how the siren Lula had got his money, when the very last person he wanted to see in all Hattiesburg just then came shuffling along the sidewalk, a trail of banana peelings two blocks long behind him. Marmaduke.

"Jest been 'round in de back de pool-room pleasurin' myse'f wid dese here bananas and hearin' things," Mr. Brown opened conversation worriedly. "Boy, you sho' is in a mess!"

Frogface pulled himself together. What Marmaduke might not know would make him a lot easier to get on with. Besides, it was none of an assistant's business. Frogface would have plenty of money again in the morning, after the hijacking profits got split.

"Jest settin' here studyin' de situation; layin' my plans, while you loafs around pool-rooms," he fired his opening gun. "Dat de big diff'ence between us—I got brains and you got bananas."

"Uh huh! And whut you gwine need in jest a little bit ain't gwine be brains—it gwine be laigs!" rejoined the brow-furrowed Marmaduke.

"How come laigs?"

"To git you out of whut yo' big mouth done got you into. I hears some boys talkin' whut seen and heared you and Vacant Carter jest now—"

"Whut you know 'bout Vacant Carter?"

"Plenty! Dem boys say you done ruin yo'se'f and ain't even know it!"

"Ain't ruin nothin'."

"Naw? All *you* done is jest tell de truck-driver whut you is gwine hijack to-night dat you is gwine hijack him: how and when and whar. Dat's all!"

"*Tell de truck driver?*"

"Uh huh. It's Vacant whut drives de liquor truck Cephas hired you to

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hijack! Dat Vacant so bad, ain't nobody over here gwine mess wid him. Jest like I tells you all de time. But yo' mouth so busy yo' ears cain't hear nothin'—"

Something between a groan and a howl from his chief cut Marmaduke temporarily off short. Mr. Reeves's over-prominent eyes were standing out like a bug's, and his over-large mouth was making strange motions and stranger sounds. But Marmaduke was in the ascendancy now—a man with a message, and a long list of past grievances to offset.

"DAT ain't all dey says," Marmaduke continued. "You ain't satisfied wid blabbin' to de bad man of Hattiesbu'g dat you gwine hijack him—you got to slosh some mo' beer around and brag dat you gwine run off wid he wife, too! You spends a *lot* of time tellin' him *dat!*"

The weakened Frogface felt around for some place to sit down again. Either Marmaduke was wrong or that beer had pulled off something serious while Frogface wasn't listening! And he couldn't erase the memory of the size of Vacant, either—or the way that table had sort of splintered away under his hands when Frogface had mentioned his plans for Lula and himself! That last remark of Mr. Carter's about seeing Frogface again began to take on a new—and perhaps true—meaning now!

"Boy cain't go on wid a job, is he git sick—" essayed Frogface feebly.

"You ain't sick—yit! You ain't even half as sick as you'll be, is Cephas keep dat hundred dollars of de lodge's money you give him to make sho' you ain't lay down on yo' job. And all you is done done wid dat treas'rer's report so fur is put it off."

The groan of Mr. Reeves started from his soles, and came all the way up, gaining in volume as it traveled. He staggered uncertainly forward.

"Whar at you gwine now, Big Boy?" questioned the watchful Marmaduke.

"Gwine check up on you, dat's whut. Sound like you done slip up somewhar in yo' figures."

"Go on and check! Den check some mo'. Onliest thing you gwine find out is de size of de jam you done talk yo'se'f into. Boy, you ain't never *seen* no trouble till now!"

Mr. Reeves staggered into a nearby fried fish stand with his problems. He was too broke to eat, but the atmosphere in there was nourishing. And a boy with all the thinking to do that he had needed sustenance, or the nearest approach to it that he could manage.

But his entrance into the stand didn't help. There were too many of the First National Pool Parlor's patrons present who had witnessed his recent ignominy. A snicker caught him in his most sensitive place. Two, however, did not snicker, being deep in discussion of a fried river-cat and something else. And it was that something else that galvanized Frogface into a mild imitation of his old inflated self. Overheard, it answered a question, opened a way out.

The difference between a smart man and Marmaduke had fresh illumination thrown upon it. There were times when only brains would serve. What he needed now was to see his assistant and get his business lined up along the new lines for the night. By morning he would be again in funds, glory, and the ascendancy.

Marmaduke was outside. To Marmaduke's swift sorrow.

"How much money you got, boy?"

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Mr. Reeves started with first things first.

"Three bucks. And you ain't git 'em."

"Ain't want 'em. Us is gwine ridin' in taxi."

Chugging out of town a few moments later in that vehicle, Marmaduke got a suddenly disquieting idea. "You ain't think you gwine git fur enough away on my three dollars to fix up yo' bus'ness wid Cephas and Vacant, is you?"

Frogface bit off the end of a fuse and applied a match to it, figuratively. "Ain't talkin' about my bus'ness now; talkin' about yourn and dat Vicksbu'g gal's."

MARMADUKE started. "Whut 'bout me and no britches-of-promise Vicksbu'g gal?" he demanded anxiously.

"Jes' dis: Whut her name?"

"Name Lula—"

"Yaller gal, and got little small scar under tip her chin?"

"Dat her."

"She's here in Hattiesbu'g now!"

Marmaduke gasped and looked about him wild-eyed. Vicksburg was not so far from here, at that.

"Lean on me, boy, or you's a gone goose," continued Frogface sternly. "Tells you all time, is you use yo' brains like me—'stead o' yo' mouth like you—you'd git somewhars besides in a jam."

The suddenly wall-eyed Marmaduke shrank twenty per cent in size and ninety per cent in assurance. Hattiesburg might be a big town, but it was not half big enough any more. Not with himself and Lula both in it. Marmaduke kept on showing symptoms of brain-fag and general debility, right when he needed to be in his prime. He gurgled ineffectively, but coherent speech failed him.

"But *I* ain't gwine rub it in," pursued Mr. Reeves nobly. "Live and let learn—dat's me all over. So, I he'ps you out wid Lula——and you he'ps me out wid Vacant—"

"*Huhhh?*"

Marmaduke achieved the high-keyed utterance of a shot cat.

"I ain't tell Lula you around Hattiesbu'g here; and fo' dat, *you* takes my place to-night, hijackin' old Vacant on de liquor truck—"

It took two—Frogface and the driver—to keep Marmaduke in the cab. Maine, Oregon, and Michigan called him; but not Mississippi. Only the clamor of his feet for the open road exceeded the clamor of his mouth for some other plan.

"—Dat way," Mr. Reeves at length ignored him and resumed his interrupted outline, "you brings in de truck wid de liquid assets on it, I gits de lodge's hundred back; pays myse'f off from de profits, plus sevum dollars, and two dollars fo' a new watch; and Lula ain't git onto yo' bein' here till you gits out of town. Eve'ything be settin' pretty!"

"Yeah," mourned the palpitant Marmaduke, "eve'ything cep'n me! You sets here safe while old Vacant messin' up de road wid me—"

"Co'se now," Frogface was suave, "if you rather I jest drap word to Lula dat you here—"

"Naw! Naw! *Naw!*" wailed the distraught Marmaduke. "I hijack it."

"Dat whut I thought all time. And don't you try layin' down on de job, neither! Cephas got to see de truck in he alley befo' I can collect back de lodge's hundred—don't fo'git dat. Once I spits on my hands and starts, I ain't let nothin' stop you! Now I

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shows you whar at you lays out in de fence cawner wid de shotgun Cephas gimme—ready fo' old man-eatin' Vacant when he come along. Dat whut I git you in dis here taxi fo' in de first place . . . And remember, you fires in de air de first time."

NIGHT on the Laurel Road. Something dark and quivering in a darkened fence corner betrayed the presence there of Marmaduke, and demonstrated his conviction that the female is far deadlier than the male. When it came to a choice between facing Vacant and Lula, Frogface had been right: Vacant won—in a bad case of St. Vitus's dance.

And back in the fence corner a lot of questions were still gumming up the brain of the world's worst frightened hijacker. Chief among them was, what would Vacant do? Vacant with the strength of a truck, the grip of a gorilla, and the disposition of a leopard with hives.

Frogface Reeves was all the time bragging about having such a big b r a i n—and now he had practically proven it by maneuvering Marmaduke into this position. Frogface, who had bragged himself into a mess of trouble and then unloaded it on the wretched Marmaduke.

"Next time I sees yaller gal wid scar under her chin, I crosses de street and gits deaf and dumb!" the wretched Marmaduke promised himself while he cowered in his corner and trembled at every nocturnal sound while he waited for the long-dreaded sound of truck wheels from the north.

Then it came! Rumble of wheels and creak of body at high speed, headlong out of Hattiesburg toward Laurel.

Marmaduke had no watch, but he knew what a truck in haste at night meant.

Fire once in the air, then begin pouring it into the body of the truck, had been Frogface's instructions. Marmaduke prepared to do and die. When he shot, the forewarned Vacant was going to shoot—and after that a lot of good timber was going to get ruined if it got between Marmaduke and Californa, that was all. A minute more and he was going to be up against it. Old Vacant sure was bumbling over the road.

The inside of Marmaduke's mouth was so dry it was dusty. Lula might have been the best bet after all—

Around the bend it roared. A truck as big as a house, big as two houses, headlights boring into the darkness, its clamor filling the night.

"Now *Now!* NOW!" something was screaming in Marmaduke's addled mind as he raised his gun. His heart was trip-hammering. He swung the muzzle waveringly aloft, pulled the trigger—and went three feet back into the brush from the recoil.

Before the a n s w e r i n g fusillade should start, Marmaduke was back on his knees, pouring birdshot into the truck body like Allied artillery at the Marne.

Then came the unbelievable. Poised for flight, the astounded Marmaduke p o l i s h e d eyes and ears with his knuckles, seeking vainly to improve their operation. But still they registered wrong, bringing in the same incredible report—that the mighty Vacant had been overestimated!

Instead of sticking by his truck and pouring a withering return fire into Marmaduke's trenches, there was unmistakable evidence that the driver was not the iron-nerved being he had been proclaimed. For t h e r e were

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sounds as of a bull moose in a barrel factory, tearing his way horizonward through fence and thicket, departing from the battle at approximately the speed of light, while the deserted truck swerved suddenly, to bury its nose in a roadside bank.

"*Dawg-gone!*" panted the shaken Marmaduke at length and admiringly to himself as stillness again overspread the landscape. "When I hijacks 'em, dey *stays* hijacked!"

He contemplated the truck, the distant cracklings of brush and brier-patch, his own swift triumph.

"Got to make haste and git dis here truck into town wid de liquid as-sets now," he communed with himself, as he backed it into the road, reversed its direction, and headed back toward Hattiesburg. Frogface's fortunes were in his hands now, in respect to that two-edged hundred dollars that belonged to the lodge and remained with Cephas unless this truck got delivered to the latter in Hattiesburg. Once that was settled, Marmaduke couldn't leave that burg too fast. Not with Lula in it. The first train out was his; he could sort out the destinations later. But with his three dollars expended on the taxi, he couldn't go anywhere until this truck got turned in.

AT the southern outskirts of the town, however, a dark figure flagged him down. With his heart in his mouth, Marmaduke slowed for boarders. If it were the Law—

But it was only Frogface. And Frogface, decided Marmaduke in relief, was fixing to get an earful. Marmaduke had done the job, and now his grievances were surely entitled to the floor.

"Sends fo' me all over de country!" Marmaduke launched into a saga of his own prowess, as Frogface climbed up beside him. "Nobody got a mean job to do, whut dey skeered to do deyselves, first boy dey thinks of is old Man-eatin' Marmaduke! Dat's me! Ain't never gum up nothin'! Start me on it, and job's jest de same as finished. 'Fast-finishin' Marmaduke,' dat whut dey call me, country over! Here de truck—whar at de train?"

Frogface recognized the quotations, but couldn't think up the repartee. Keeping Marmaduke in his place was going to be harder than ever, apparently. And he was still behind on his worrying: Cephas had talked mighty grand, but a boy was never sure of money until he got it. Which left, as the only certainty, Hail-Columbia in the lodge hall, did he check up short as treasurer on his return.

"Drive on in. I show you de streets," Frogface instructed glumly but firmly.

Under a street light he turned in his seat and peered back into the truck body. After which he seemed suddenly to develop symptoms of angina pectoris complicated with halitosis and falling of the arches.

"Whut de matter wid you, boy? Yo' brains give out on you?" asked Marmaduke at the wheel. Never again would Frogface lord it over *him*—not after this coup!

But Frogface was having some trouble with more things than his brain. A lethargy was upon him, mingled with some fear that shook him like an ague.

"Hold on dar! Lemme git down!" he was imploring thickly.

His ensuing actions were no less assuring. Rather, they conjured up possibilities that set cold shivers roaming the Marmadukian backbone. What if— He dared not think it, let alone look back into the truck to see. Frog-

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face was fumbling frantically at its rear door, in some evident awful fear.

When Mr. Reeves returned, it was with the face of one who had been confronted by a major predicament and had suddenly staked all on one last desperate throw of the dice.

"Drive ahead!" Frogface croaked feebly. "And when I says stop, I means *stop!*—in de darkest part of de alley back of Cephas's place. He be dar—and Lawd he'p us den!"

The nature of this startling discovery of Frogface's became the subject of a curiosity that ate into Marmaduke like acid, but Frogface urged him on unrelentingly now.

"STOP!" hissed his superior abruptly. Figures stepped from deeper shadows in an alley's blackness. Among them the familiar bulk of Cephas.

Conferrings followed—in whispers, Frogface in the thickest of them, Marmaduke unenlightened and unimportant upon their outer edges. Something changed hands in the dark. And all the time Frogface's whispers hoarsening, with an odd new note in them that set Marmaduke's spine prickling—as if there was more here than met the ear. A sort of sitting-on-dynamite sensation not warranted by the known facts, and lending weight to the unknown ones that had so stirred Frogface and mystified Marmaduke.

Then Frogface at his elbow, stuffing something into his pocket as he commanded, "Step on it, nigger! Like you ain't never step on nothin' befo' in yo' life."

Their direction was mystifying, too—not toward the hotel.

"Whar us gwine? Whut yo' hurry?" quarreled the hustled Marmaduke. "I done pull yo' bus'ness out de fire, den you gallop de laigs off me. Whar ouah baggage?"

"*Baggage! Out de fire?*" exploded Frogface, looking back and speeding up. "When you hears what yo' is done to-night, boy, you ain't even wait fo' yo' pants! Us got nine minutes to cotch a train in!"

A new alarm shot across the barren plain of Marmaduke's intellect. "You means Lula done after me ag'in?" he put it into anguished words.

"Lula!" snorted Frogface. "I jest tells you about her so as to git you into doin' dat hijackin' fo' me: she an' her britches-of-promise ain't nothin' to be skeered of since she marry somebody else—Vacant Carter."

Bewilderment, relief and resentment collided in Marmaduke's cranium. He had been framed into all that fright, then. But he was on top now. From now on. His was the brain that had saved Frogface, opened the door for a new deal—

"Never was scared of old Lula nohow," Marmaduke fired the opening gun of a boasting campaign that, he reflected happily, should never cease. "Brains from de neck up—dat's me, eve'y time. Whut yo' hurry, nigger?"

"To git out of town wid dis lodge money refund befo' it gits light enough fo' Cephas to see just how I pulls my bus'ness out de fire."

"Cephas to see? See whut?"

And then to Marmaduke the explanation of mysteries, the crash of his brief triumph, as Frogface burst out:

"See *whut?* See how I locks de back doors of dat truck so he cain't see till us is gone dat you done mess up eve'ything as usual—and hijacked a *milk truck,* 'stead of Vacant's truckload of liquor!"

THE END.

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He was lifted from his feet and thrown violently backward

Forbidden Valley

Young Austin Alvord did not know how much he had to win or lose when he rode into the rangeland feud between his stern old uncles and the scheming Thorn Caldwell—but he soon found his very life was at stake

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

DISREGARDING the threat of death to any intruder into Old Man Valley, Austin Alvord, young cow-puncher, enters it to fulfill a promise made his dying mother. Old Jumbo Alvord, who lives and rules in the valley with his two old brothers, refuses to accept Austin as his nephew, even after Austin has saved Jumbo from a beating at the hands of Thorn Caldwell, neighboring rancher, who has bought the support of Sheriff Harker in an attempt to kill off the old men and get their land.

Austin, who learns that Caldwell is his mother's adopted brother, and that he has taken illegal possession of land that Austin should have inherited, finds himself thrown into the midst of a bitter feud between Caldwell and the Alvords. Austin, trying to help the old men, finds both factions bitter against him.

Austin intercepts Caldwell's ten-year-old son, Grant, who was running away because of Caldwell's brutality, and returns him to his sister Edith. He urges her to leave Caldwell's house, but she refuses to leave her brother to her father's wrath.

Austin discovers the body of old Mose Alvord, murdered by two of

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Harker's deputies. When he takes the body to the Alvord ranch he is forced into physical combat with old Jumbo, bests him and apparently kills him, and barely escapes with his life. He seeks refuge in Bennington, a near-by cow town, and there witnesses an attempt on the part of Sheriff Harker and his deputies to murder old Rube Alvord.

Austin joins the fight, in which Rube and two deputies are killed, then escapes toward Old Man Valley, a posse following him. He hides in a cabin high up on Caldwell's range. Caldwell and Banty Vogel, his hired gunman, come to the cabin. Austin overpowers them and forces Caldwell to sign a confession that he has plotted to drive the old men from their land. Seizing their chance, Caldwell and Vogel attack Austin, disarm him and tie him up. Vogel leaves to get help and Caldwell discovers that the confession he has just signed has disappeared. Austin rolls toward his gun, on the floor, and Caldwell, raging at the disappearance of the confession, starts to shoot him.

CHAPTER XVII.

A HAZARDOUS CHANCE.

WHILE Caldwell was drawing, Austin made a final desperate roll, picked the gun up in his two lashed-together hands, and continued on over until he was on his back. He saw Caldwell's gun out of the holster. The cattleman might be slow, but he was certainly going to be sure. It was impossible for Austin to aim except by pure instinct. He twisted his hands toward his enemy and pulled the trigger.

As his gun roared he heard Caldwell give a sharp, exclamatory oath, and heard something strike the floor with a thud. Then he realized that Caldwell had fled through the open door.

Austin got to his feet and swayed there dizzily. By will power alone he fought off the weakness that was about to master him, and staggered toward the door.

The fresh air revived him somewhat, and he again raised the gun as high as he could and fired at his enemy. But Caldwell was already on his horse and galloping away.

As Austin stepped back inside he saw Caldwell's six-gun lying on the floor with a broken cylinder. Apparently his first shot had struck the gun instead of the man's hand, but the pain of having it torn out of the hand had probably been as great as if he had been hit.

The first thing he had to think about was getting his hands loose. There was a butcher knife on the table and it was only two or three minutes until he had the leather string severed. He forced himself to drink a few swallows of water. Then, soaking one corner of a towel which he had taken out of his own war-bag that morning, he contrived to wash his head-wound after a fashion.

By that time he felt considerably better, and able to go out and hunt for Vinegar Bally. Whether he felt like it or not he knew that he had to be getting away from the cabin soon. Caldwell would be sending a posse back to capture him. He knew that the rancher had another matter even more urgent to attend to, first. That business was to regain possession of the damning confession he had signed.

Austin had not seen the papers disappear any more than Caldwell had, but only one person could have taken them—Banty Vogel. Vogel's object in

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stealing the confession was obvious. With it he would hold the whip hand over his employer, and would be able to levy blackmail whenever he desired.

That Caldwell would kill the man with no compunction if he overtook him while in his present mood was certain. What worried Austin far more, however, was fear that Caldwell in his violent, insane rage would harm Grant and Edith if he failed to find Banty Vogel.

Uncertain what to do, knowing only that he must disappear from the vicinity of the cabin, Austin painfully mounted Vinegar Bally and set off toward Exchange Summit. Once, as he rode along, he glimpsed the Caldwell ranch house far below. As he looked, a group of armed men dashed from the ranch and started toward Old Man Valley. It looked like a raid, and Austin immediately decided to warn the old men. He put the spurs to Bally, but when he reached Exchange Summit he saw that the marauders had already passed that way. Without hesitation he started after them.

IT was only the alertness of Vinegar Bally which kept him from riding right in among the men where they had stopped at the mouth of the cañon. The horse threw up his ears as he glimpsed the other horses through the trees, and instantly Austin reined him to the side of the road.

He dismounted and tied Bally to a sapling. Then he went on cautiously, keeping to the bank of a small, chattering creek, and presently he caught sight of the group of saddle horses. Inch by inch Austin squirmed closer, determined to discover what was going on there.

"What if they won't come along with Harker?" a man asked. "They'll be expectin' us then, an' them old devils can fight."

"They'll come all right," another man answered. "They can't refuse. Harker is a smooth talker. When he tells 'em that old Rube can't be buried until his brothers go in an' claim the body they'll come."

"Reckon old Jumbo himself will come out?"

"Of course. An' let me tell yuh something: When the shootin' starts here don't quit pumpin' lead into that old boy till yuh know he's dead. I bet that old devil can eat more lead than any man in the State."

It was the first information Austin had had about his uncle since he had left Bennington, and apparently old Jumbo had recovered from their fight. Now the old man was to be led into a murder trap by the contemptible sheriff.

Again Austin wondered why Thorn Caldwell should be so intent upon getting control of Old Man Valley. Another thought popped into his mind; one that would never have occurred to him had it not been for the events of the morning. He and Thorn Caldwell seemed to be joint heirs to the Caldwell estate. Was it not possible that Thorn Caldwell would be his heir if the old men, his uncles, were dead? Thorn had been legally adopted by old man Caldwell. That made him Austin's uncle. If Austin inherited Old Man Valley through the death of all the old men, and he should then die himself, would not Caldwell have the right to inherit it? He found the hair rising along the back of his head as he contemplated what might happen if Caldwell's whole scheme went through.

Now that he had reasoned this out he remembered how old man Caldwell, his maternal grandfather, had tried to

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force the Alvords into bankruptcy years before so that he could come into possession of the valley. His adopted son was still after it, and apparently the fight had always continued. Was it possible, he wondered, that there was some source of wealth in the valley about which few people knew?

He dismissed this idea from his mind, to listen. One of the men was speaking again.

"You suppose that young Alvord is in the valley yet? He must be a fightin' fool the way he done up them two gunmen Thorn had in here, an' then got away from Thorn an' Banty this mornin'."

"If he's in there we'll git him when we git the rest o' the outfit, but Thorn thinks he'll hide out in the timber all day an' then sneak down through here at night. If he does he'll git one grand surprise."

Austin waited to hear no more. He backed cautiously away to the creek. The old men had to be warned at once before Harker returned with them.

HE returned to his horse, mounted, and guided the animal stealthily along the creek until he was opposite the men. A bit of brush compelled him to make Bally jump the creek, and as the horse landed on the other side he kicked loose a small rock that rolled down into the creek.

"What's that?" a man of the posse called sharply.

Austin made no more effort to keep concealed. He touched Bally with the spurs and loped along the creek to where it could be crossed again and then headed for the open at a run.

They were after him in a minute. "Come on, boys, he knows our game," a man yelled. "If we don't stop him Harker'll be in trouble."

"Try to stop me, you scum," Austin shouted back, and emphasized his defiance with a bullet that hit somebody's horse. The animal emitted a bawl and began to buck through the timber. He had put one of his foes afoot to begin with.

He made a direct line for the house of the old men, and Vinegar Bally's speed had never served a better purpose than it did then. Bullets were buzzing around them like a swarm of bees, but the bay was too fast-moving a target for any of them to take effect. By the time they reached the open Austin had a good lead.

He had followed his foes' example by jerking out his rifle and he was replying to their fire more with the idea of arousing the old men than with the hope of hitting anything. But just before he came in sight of the house he had the satisfaction of seeing a horse fall.

As he rode in sight of the house he saw three men riding away — undoubtedly Harker and two of the old men. They stopped when they saw him. He wondered grimly what thoughts were in their minds as they saw this unexpected pursuit. The white bandage on his head and his lathering horse undoubtedly made him look like a fleeing desperado, but he did not think that Sheriff Harker appeared very happy.

He was halfway down the slope when his leading pursuers came in sight. When he was nearly to the three horsemen, whom he now recognized as his two uncles, Jumbo and Hank, and Sheriff Harker, he saw that his pursuers, now eight in number, were slowing down.

Austin drew Bally to a sliding stop in front of the three men. His rifle was thrown across the saddle in front

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of him. He could see Paddy Mallory and three other old men coming out of the house on foot. All of the old men were armed.

"Up with them hands," Sheriff Harker barked shrilly, his gun pointed directly at Austin.

The younger man laughed. "You wouldn't dare shoot, Harker," he taunted. "You didn't even dare to try to kill these old men in a fair fight. Yuh come down here with a lie on yore lips to git my uncles to start to town with you so that murderin' crew yonder could ambush 'em when they reached the mouth o' the cañon."

"It's a lie!" the sheriff exclaimed, though his face had gone pale.

"It's the truth," Austin said steadily, his eyes never leaving the gun in the sheriff's hand. He had let go of the rifle with his right hand and was moving it almost imperceptibly toward the handle of his six-gun. "I can tell yuh the story you used to git these men to go with yuh, because I listened to yore men talk after you left them there, five on either side of the road where it runs through the middle of that first dense thicket. You told 'em that Uncle Rube couldn't be buried until—"

With a snarl like a cornered coyote Sheriff Harker pressed the trigger. The next moment the long arm of old Jumbo Alvord went around his throat and the sheriff was dragged from the saddle.

CHAPTER XVIII.

OLD JUMBO'S FINAL GESTURE.

AUSTIN had known that the sheriff would shoot when he saw that exposure was inevitable, and he was watching the man for the first telltale movement. He saw the sheriff's arm start to straighten as he shoved the gun forward. A spur was jabbed home, Vinegar Bally leaped ahead and the sheriff's bullet sped through the air where his intended victim had been an instant before.

Austin had drawn while his horse was in the air, but old Jumbo's timely grab had saved him the necessity of shooting the sheriff.

Harker's face was ashy from fear as old Jumbo dumped him unceremoniously to the ground. He still held his gun, but he dared not use it.

"So that's what yuh was up to, huh?" old Jumbo grunted. "Tell yore damn murderers to come on in. We'll welcome 'em."

"It's a lie, an' I'll fix you all fer this outrageous treatment," the officer shouted.

The other old men had now gathered around, and their bearded, weather-beaten faces betrayed their complete bewilderment.

"Look here, Jumbo, we kain't trust that feller. We all know what he's after," one of the old men spoke up with a baleful glare at Austin.

"That's right. I don't want nothin' to do with him," old Hank concurred.

"Shut up!" Jumbo roared. "I told him if he could lick me he could make his home in here. He done it, fair an' square, though I dunno how he knocked me out so long. But what I said goes. He's at home in this valley."

"Then, Jumbo Alvord, ye mean to break yore promise to let us have this ranch after you an' Hank are gone, eh?" squealed one of the old men on the ground furiously. "I allus thought yuh was jist lyin' about that to git us to work fer ye fer nothin'."

And before anybody could guess his intentions this old man jerked up his gun and fired straight at old Jumbo!

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The action was so unexpected that everybody was completely dazed. For a moment old Jumbo sat still in the saddle, a surprised look on his grim old face. Then, at first very slowly, he started to fall. Austin jumped to the ground and caught him.

"Look out! Here they come!" another old man yelled, and Austin saw the eight mounted men who had pursued him charging down upon the house.

At the same time he caught a glimpse of Sheriff Harker legging it for the cottonwoods. He would have shot the man if he could, but he had to support old Jumbo. Then he saw old Hank Alvord spurring in pursuit of the sheriff. A moment later he heard two shots, and saw old Hank fall out of the saddle. He did not see what had happened to Harker.

"Who'd 'a' thought that ole Jock Grimm would 'a' done that?" Jumbo mumbled, apparently too surprised to feel any other emotion.

Austin looked around helplessly and saw only old Paddy Mallory. "Come on, Paddy, we must git him into the house," he said.

The two of them had all they could do to carry the huge old man inside. And by the time they had him on a bed the Caldwell crowd was outside. They could not go out to see what had happened to Hank Alvord.

"Never mind me — git at the winders an' give 'em hell," old Jumbo commanded weakly.

LOOKING around, Austin saw that Paddy was the only one who had come in the house. But sounds of firing outside told him that the others had not been able to make their escape.

"Well, me bye, we're in fer it," old Paddy said with a trace of a grin. "But these are thick ole walls an' they may have their fun bustin' in. Take yer rifle an' git upstairs—yer eyes are better'n mine so I'll stay down here. An' be thankful that old Jumbo here saw fit tuh put a winder on every side."

Austin had clung to his rifle, and he found that there were some extra guns and plenty of ammunition in the house. He ran up the stairway and looked around. There were several rooms downstairs, but the whole second story was one rambling room. Not only were there windows on every side, but there were cracks and knotholes which could be used as loopholes.

He could see only one of the three old men outside, and this was the man who had shot Jumbo. He had taken refuge among the cottonwoods surrounding the spring at the back of the house, and his gun was roaring occasionally as some of the raiders came within his range of vision. Austin located the other two old men, though they were not in sight. One had taken shelter in a machine shed, while the other had hidden himself under a bank of a creek. The sheriff's men had already had enough of open fighting and they had sought shelter wherever they could and were pouring a persistent fire at the house and the places where the outside men were stationed.

The situation did not look so bad, except for one thing. There was no way to retreat from the house, and the posse could hold them there until reinforcements arrived. There was no doubt that the besiegers were fighting men, and they outnumbered the besieged two to one. Austin wondered why the three old men had not come into the house, and then realized that it was probably because the one who had shot Jumbo feared to come in, and the other two had sided with him.

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That opinion was justified a few minutes later when the firing outside stopped and he could hear the voice of Sheriff Harker addressing these old fellows.

"Why don't you fellows give up?" the sheriff demanded. "You've got nothin' to win by fightin' us. Old Jumbo and young Alvord have been double-crossin' yuh. We'll only have to kill you if you persist in fightin' us."

Some more colloquy followed, and presently the three old men walked out and surrendered.

"Did yez ever see the beat av it fer a bunch o' domned ole cowards?" Paddy called up the stairs.

"Looks like we're in for it," Austin said. Just then he saw a man's leg projecting from behind a fence, and drew a bead on it. At the report of his rifle there was a cry of pain and the man he had shot rolled over and over in a frenzy of pain.

"Ah, the lad got one, Jumbo," Paddy crowed.

BUT now began a steady fire against the house. Several times Austin jumped back hurriedly as a bullet ripped through the window where he was trying to locate a foe. A lurid string of Irish oaths from down below told him that Paddy Mallory had been nicked.

The posse was now able to surround the house, and despite the vigilance of the two defenders they were getting closer and closer. It would only be a matter of time until they would be able to force themselves inside.

Though Austin had caught a few fleeting glimpses of the men outside he had not been able to tally against them any more. He could see no possible hope of escape until dark, and then the chances were not more than one in a thousand. And if old Jumbo was still alive as darkness fell he would not take that.

He went downstairs, realizing that now the only effective way to resist was to try to pick the men off when they attempted to rush the house. Old Paddy was limping badly from a bullet wound in the fleshy part of his thigh, and Jumbo Alvord lay white and motionless on the bed. His eyes stared toward the front door and his bony fingers gripped the butt of his six-gun. It seemed that the old man was being kept alive only by the hope that he might get one of his enemies when they came in the door.

It was growing late, and it was getting hard for the two defenders to see clearly as they moved from room to room, trying to watch all sides of the house at once. Suddenly Austin heard old Paddy swearing l o u d l y in the kitchen. Springing over to the door he saw the old Irishman crouched on one side of the big kitchen range, a man opposite him. As Austin appeared in the partition door another man stuck his head through the window where the first man must have entered, for all the doors were barricaded.

Almost in the same breath four bullets crossed each other in the room. Old Paddy had fired full into the face in the window, but he had exposed himself to the man on the other side of the stove. That man was quick to take advantage of the situation, but Austin fired from the hip and the man slumped to the floor and rolled out from behind the stove with a bullet in his brain.

Hearing a door open behind him Austin whirled, but before he could shoot at the man he saw framed in the opposite doorway the gun in old Jumbo's hand spoke and the man fell forward.

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As Austin crossed the room he saw another man hastily tumbling out of the window. Rushing over he fired and brought the man down before he could reach cover. A bullet from outside splintered the last unbroken pane of glass in the window and Austin's face and hands were cut in a dozen places by the shower of glass.

"Come on back, yuh fools, we got it afire," he heard somebody yell. A minute or so later he smelled smoke. The house was old and dry and he knew that, once started, it would burn like tinder.

ANY effort to leave the house would be fatal, for every door and window was closely watched. At that Austin would have taken the chance had he been alone. By taking a running jump through one particular window he might get out before being shot, and the cottonwoods had grown up thick on that side. But he could not abandon the old men and leave them to be burned alive. To get old Jumbo out of the house was out of the question, and the old man would never surrender. The only thing to do, apparently, was for him to take it on himself to surrender. It would mean death for all of them, but he was sure it would permit him to get his uncle out of the burning building.

"Come here, nephew," old Jumbo called authoritatively.

"I'm here—uncle," Austin said. The salutations were a bit difficult for both of them.

"I'm peggin' out," the old man said with a twisted grin. "I reckon I made a big mistake treatin' Jim the way I did—yore father I mean—but I loved him more'n anything else in the world. Rube, Bill, an' Hank were jist brothers to me, but Jim was like a son. When —when he married the daughter o' my worst enemy I jist couldn't stand it."

"I think I know how you felt," Austin said softly.

"It was a mistake. So was my idee in havin' nobody around here but old men. Now one of 'em has done fer me, an' they've all deserted me but Paddy. I'm sorry I treated you the way I did, but I wanta make it up the best I can."

"No hard feelin's," Austin said. "I'm sorry this all had to happen."

"I'm goin' to make amends the best I kin," Jumbo continued. "If Hank is dead, an' I suppose he is, all we own will belong to you. The papers is fixed so that the title don't go to the old men here as long as there's an Alvord livin'. You're an Alvord right enough. I reckon yuh can't dispose of it as long as any o' these old men are alive. Take care o' Paddy, but don't git any more of 'em. When Paddy dies you'll be undisputed owner."

Austin could say nothing. Old Jumbo's mind must be wandering, he thought, for there certainly was no escape for any of them. The house was rapidly filling with smoke, and it was getting uncomfortably warm.

"Paddy," Jumbo said, "you know how to git into the potato cellar through the trap door in the kitchen. Take my nephew along with you an' hide there till yuh both git a chance to git away."

"But you?" Austin protested.

"Before yuh go tell 'em I surrender. They'll come in an' take me out so I won't be burned up. I'm dyin' anyway. It'll be too hot for 'em to look for you boys an' they'll think you've burned up in the house," Jumbo said.

"But why can't we take you into the cellar with us?" Austin demanded.

"Because I won't go," the old man

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said grimly. "I ain't got an hour to live, an' I gotta talk to Sheriff Harker."

"THERE'S no changin' him, an' it's the best we kin do, bye," old Paddy said. The old Irishman stepped close to the door and bellowed to the men outside that old Jumbo wanted to surrender.

"Come on out," a voice commanded.

"We can't," Paddy called back. "We gotta have help to carry Jumbo out."

"All right. But if yuh don't act straight we'll let yuh all burn," came the reply from Sheriff Harker.

"Come on, lad. Give Jumbo his own way," Paddy urged. "The ould divil has had it most all his loife an' it'd kill him not to git it now."

Still Austin hesitated.

"Git out before I take a shot at yuh," old Jumbo snarled. Then Austin stepped over and wrung the old man's hand hard, and followed Paddy into the kitchen.

The old Irishman moved aside a table and opened a small trap door, motioning for Austin to descend first. When the door was shut again Austin found himself in total darkness. He groped for old Paddy and found him just as the Irishman fumbled and found another door and drew him through it. It was a bit lighter here, because there was a ventilator shaft in the top. Austin stepped upon some loose potatoes and almost fell.

"That was the main cellar, but we keep the spuds partitioned off by thimselves," Paddy explained. "Right there by that ventilator is the hole where we pour the spuds down. If we're lucky that's the way we'll git outa here."

"If we're lucky," Austin mused. "I don't see a chance." What would happen when Harker entered the house, he wondered? Would Jumbo Alvord try to shoot the sheriff as his final gesture? Harker, he was sure, would be too wily to permit that. But he could not believe that the sheriff would realize that he and Paddy would be foolish enough to stay and perish.

Suddenly he felt himself lifted off his feet and thrown violently among the potatoes. His head was throbbing, but he retained his senses. The first thunderous explosion he had heard was followed by the sound of rending timbers, and then a dull crash as the big old house of the Alvords collapsed.

"I reckon now that ould Jumbo has played his last card," Paddy Mallory said soberly. "I only hope all thim divils was in there."

"Man, did you know this was goin' to happen?" Austin cried.

"Sure an' I knowed it," old Paddy said. "It wuz me that hilped Jumbo rig up the wire that led from the batt'ry in the corner o' his bed down through a hole in the flure an' over to the din-amite under the house sills. Ould Rube was the only other wan that iver knowed about it. Ould Jumbo figgered that he might be hard prissed some day an' if the worse came to the worst he meant to take some av his enemies along wid him—an' I reckon now that he did."

Austin lay still. The horror of the thing had left him too dazed to speak.

CHAPTER XIX.

TWO CRITICAL ENCOUNTERS.

IT was a long time before Austin or Paddy felt able to move. Both were exhausted by their injuries and the strenuous exertions of the day. Moreover, the heat inside the cellar warned

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them they they could not get out until the fire died down.

The door by which they had entered was completely blocked by débris, and a part of the roof had fallen over the dump hole in the top of the cellar, the only way for them to get out. They had to wait until this burned away, and then they had to lift off some heavy timbers which had not burned. They had been fortunate that the sturdy roof of the cellar had not collapsed upon them.

It was daybreak when they finally got out and looked around at the ruins. Nothing was left of the house but a pile of hot ashes and a few charred timbers. There was nobody in sight.

It was highly improbable that there had been more than two or three men inside the house when Jumbo Alvord had blown it up, but at best the losses of the posse had been heavy. Austin was a bit surprised that there were no dead men lying around. He had certainly expected to find the body of Hank Alvord, but it was not there. Then Paddy made the discovery that a team and wagon were missing. Further investigation showed considerable blood around the place where the wagon had stood. It was evident that the survivors had loaded the dead and wounded into the wagon and taken them to town.

"The vict'ry is ours an' the enemy is in full retreat," old Paddy commented.

"Yes—an' what a victory," Austin said somberly. "All this bloodshed, and the man who caused most of it is still unharmed. You'll go to prison, Paddy, for your part in this, an' I'll hang. People don't overlook the killing of sheriffs these days, an' we ain't got a bit of proof that Harker and his men were crooked."

"I hadn't thought o' that," Paddy confessed. "Lad, I'm beginnin' to hate the sight o' Old Man Valley."

"We'd just as well leave here," Austin said in a curiously dead tone. "Where are your saddle horses?"

Paddy indicated the pasture, and Austin was overjoyed to see Vinegar Bally on the outside of the fence. The horse was still saddled and bridled.

But when the sun came up Austin's mood began to change. There were still things to be accomplished now that he had escaped from the valley. Thorn Caldwell was still at large, and so was Banty Vogel unless Caldwell had done away with him. If he could just get hold of Vogel and get Caldwell's confession away from him things would not be nearly so hopeless.

They rode directly toward the T. H. ranch. Austin believed that he could persuade Mike Earnshaw to at least give him a chance, and both he and Paddy were badly in need of food.

THE first man to spot them as they approached was Curly Lowe. His face was a study as he looked at the battle-scarred visage of his friend. The blood-soaked bandage which Austin had wrapped around his head the day before was still in place, and he had not stopped to wash the gashes he had received from the flying glass in the battle at the house. Adding to the general disorder of his appearance, and Paddy's as well, were streaks of dirt and soot across their faces which they had accumulated while digging out of the cellar.

"My golly, if it wasn't fer that ball-faced horse I'd know you was somebody else," Curly said. "What in thunder have you-all been doin'?"

"Bein' blowed up was the last little thing we indulged in," Austin said.

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"Yo' look it," Curly declared. "Fo' Pete's sake come an' git washed up."

"Gladly," Austin agreed. But he saw Mike Earnshaw and the other boys of the T. H. coming out of the bunk house, and he saw, too, that they were heavily armed. He stopped his horse, and his fingers curved ready for a fast draw. If this was the reception he was going to get they would see that he still had fight in him. Any one who tried to stop him before he had a chance to meet Caldwell and Vogel was going to have trouble.

"It's all right," Curly said. "It's not you they're expectin'. It's Caldwell."

"What?"

"He's threatened to come over here an' tear us all apart, so naturally the boys are wearin' their hardware," Curly said.

"Caldwell—has been over here?" Austin asked incredulously. "Why? And why should he threaten you?"

"His kid's here," Curly said laconically. And just then Austin saw Grant Caldwell coming from behind the men. The boy grinned cheerfully.

Austin acknowledged the greetings of the men and then turned his attention to the boy. "Where's Edith, Grant?" he asked.

"I guess she's home," the boy replied. "When she found out my dad knew about the grub I'd cached in the old cabin she made me come over here an' ask Mike Earnshaw to pertect me."

"It's a mighty funny story the kid tells, Austin, but you an' the old man git in here an' git fixed up, an' we'll go over it," Mike Earnshaw said.

"But I heard Thorn Caldwell threaten to kill Edith, and if she's over there alone—" Austin protested.

"If he intended to murder her he'd done it before this," Earnshaw said. "Keep cool, an' tell us what's happened."

WHILE the men took care of his and Paddy's wounds and brought them breakfast, Austin told them what had occurred since he had left the ranch.

"Why didn't yuh tell us yuh was an Alvord?" Mike wanted to know.

"I wasn't after anything, so I didn't se why I should. It might have made trouble."

"It did," Mike said sarcastically. "They had me believin' that you was a genuine crook until this kid showed up here yesterday with a note from his sister askin' us to keep the kid away from his dad at all hazards. When Grant told his story there was nothin' else for us to do. So when Caldwell come for him we wouldn't let the kid go. I reckon it sorta spells trouble for the outfit, but yuh can't hand over a kid to a brute like Caldwell when yuh know how he's been treated."

"But why didn't Edith come herself?" Austin wondered.

"I wanted her to, but she wouldn't come," Grant said. "She said she'd just as well have a show-down with him first as last."

"A show-down? But how?"

"We don't know, except just what the boy told us," Mike said. "But it seems that there's been trouble between the girl an' Caldwell for a long time, an' yore showin' up here kinda brought it to a head. She didn't know who you was until Grant here overheard Sheriff Harker tell Caldwell. Grant had been doin' quite a lot o' listenin' in when they didn't know it an' he reported regular to his sister."

"When I got back from the cabin that mornin' an' told her that dad an'

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Banty Vogel had you caught up there she sent me over here so dad wouldn't beat up on me, but she stayed because she said they'd kill you unless she did, an' she thought she could make 'em turn yuh loose," Grant continued the story.

"There's somethin' mighty queer about this," Austin said. "Ain't you heard anything more from her?"

"Not a word," Mike said.

"Then I'm going to find out what's happened to her," Austin said, reaching for his hat.

"Easy, boy," Mike protested. "You're in trouble enough as it is. The fellows that escaped from that blow-up last night will be back with a big posse from town. Caldwell will be over with a gang, an' your only chance is for us to protect you until we can git to the truth of this business."

But Austin was not to be denied. "I've been caught in one trap lately, an' I'm not getting into another of the same kind. If I'm not here you won't be in so much danger, and I've got to find Caldwell."

He half expected old Paddy to want to go with him, but to his relief the old man had given way to fatigue and was sound asleep. There was another volunteer, however, who would not be denied. This was Curly Lowe.

"Don't argue, boy, I'm goin' along," Curly said. "You an' me was pals an' I'm plumb ashamed o' myse'f fo' not stickin' by yuh all the time." Nor could he be dissuaded.

A few minutes later the two were on their way, and soon Austin was glad that Curly was along; for the puncher knew a trail to the T Bench on which there was little chance of meeting anybody. They knew it was possible for Caldwell to already be on his way to the T. H., but if he was it was all the better. Above all Austin wanted to assure himself of the girl's safety.

AS they approached Caldwell's house they saw two people riding away. Instantly Austin spurred into a gallop and shouted for them to stop. It was Edith and Banty Vogel.

There was a grin on Vogel's evil little face as Austin and Curly dashed up. The girl was pale.

"Edith, where are you going with that skunk?" Austin demanded with a glare at the little gunman.

"We were on our way to Bennington," she replied.

"Why?"

"To git married," Banty Vogel answered with a grin.

Austin looked quickly toward the girl, but the indignant denial he expected did not come.

"Shall I kill it?" Curly asked.

"Try it," Vogel said with unexpected vehemence. "I don't want any truck with this other feller because I know what he can do, but nobody else in this country wants to try gun talk on me."

"Shut up—you!" Austin snapped. "There's an error here o' some kind," he said to the girl. "You hate this little viper, so why are you going with him?"

"Because he's got something I must have—and I can get it no other way," Edith answered.

"Well, ma'am, if that's all that's troublin' yuh we'll jest take it away from him," Curly volunteered. "What is it yuh want?"

"It's a paper, but it's in Bennington," the girl said.

"An' it stays there till I git what I want," Vogel said with a twisted grin.

Austin gazed steadily at the girl un-

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til she raised her eyes to his. A wave of color swept across her cheeks. Suddenly Austin's hand slipped down to the handle of his gun like a streak of light, and before Banty Vogel knew what was happening the muzzle of it was pressed against his body.

"Now, yuh weasel," Austin hissed, "yuh'll tell where that paper is or eat all the lead there is in this gun!"

Vogel swallowed hard, but his self-possession did not entirely desert him. "Killin' me won't help yuh none," he said nervously. "If anything happens to me it's fixed to go to another party. An' he'll use it for the same purpose I got it fer—to blackmail Thorn Caldwell."

"I see," Austin said. "Then it was to get your father's confession that you were willing to marry Vogel. What were you going to do with it?" he asked the girl.

"It wasn't to protect father," the girl said quickly. "They told me that you would be hung for killing that man Bowles, but this paper would clear you. Yesterday father was trying to find Banty here, and he would have killed him if he had, I think. Then to-day Banty came back here and offered to produce the paper if I'd marry him. He told me all about how you made father confess it all up there in the cabin."

"We'd better kill it," Curly growled.

"Not yet," Austin said. "We're going back to the house and try to use reason with him. He left that paper in Bennington with some pal of his who could use it to blackmail Caldwell if anything happens to Vogel here."

VOGEL'S face had turned a greenish cast. "It won't do you no good," he gritted. "It'll be used to hold Caldwell up, but it won't keep you from swingin'."

"Take his gun, Curly," Austin said. When the little gunman was relieved of his weapon Austin turned to Edith. "Grant is over to the T. H. ranch and he needs you mighty bad. You'd better go along with Curly."

"No," the girl refused. "I'm going to stay here."

"But why?" Austin insisted.

"Because I've got to see father when he comes back. I haven't seen him since yesterday. I don't know whether you know it or not but he has robbed you. This whole ranch, everything he has, belongs to you."

"My gosh!" Curly was the only one to betray surprise.

"Not everything," Austin denied. "At the best I don't come in for more than half. Caldwell was the adopted son of my grandfather."

"Come on back to the house and I'll tell you some things you ought to know," the girl said.

"You little fool you, keep yore mouth shut," Banty Vogel squealed.

Before Austin could move Curly had reached out and slapped the little spy across the face with his open hand.

"Go on to town, Curly, an' tell 'em Vogel has cashed in," Austin said coolly. "My guess is that the Capitol saloon would be a good place to spread the news. For all we know that paper we want may be in Nate Libby's safe."

The convulsive jerk of Banty Vogel's head convinced him that he had accidentally hit upon the truth.

"Better let me help yuh string this bird up, or at least tie him up," Curly suggested.

"Thanks, I can handle him," Austin refused.

Curly turned back toward town, and the other three rode back to the corrals and put their horses in a stable. Then they went into the house.

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"I'll be watchin' you every second, Vogel, and you ought to know by this time that the reason I'm leavin' you free is because I hope that you will take it into your head to do something rash."

"I know it," Vogel wailed. "Yuh're just a cold-blooded killer. Yuh'd like to git a chance to shoot me."

"I would," Austin acknowledged grimly. "I know you'd never use your gun except in an underhanded way, which is why I had Curly take it away from you. But I'd like to see yuh start to run."

"I won't," Vogel said stubbornly.

"What was it you wanted to tell me, Edith?" Austin asked.

"When I'm through you're going to hate me, but I want you to understand that I didn't know who you were until yesterday," the girl began. "If I had I would have told you everything before. And if it hadn't been for Grant I would have got out of it long ago. But I couldn't leave him."

"Why, I know that," Austin said fervently. "You've been wonderful. You don't have to make no defense to me—ever."

"Ho! Got a case on her, have yuh?" Banty Vogel jeered.

Austin leaped and caught the little man by the collar of his shirt, and giving it a vicious twist jerked Vogel to his feet gasping for breath. But whatever punishment he was about to inflict passed from his mind as he saw a horseman dash past the window.

The horse was white with lather, and the rider flung himself from the saddle before it had fully stopped and hurried toward the house.

Austin saw an open door leading into a bedroom and he dragged Banty Vogel into it, and out of sight. But he kept his grasp on his shirt collar.

The man hurrying up the path was Thorn Caldwell. When he entered the living room the only person he saw was Edith.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MYSTERY OF THE VALLEY.

EDITH had said she was staying at the ranch because she wanted a show-down with her father. True, she had been on her way to Bennington to sacrifice herself to clear Austin of a murder charge when he arrived, but that was only another evidence of her fearless determination to do what she thought was right. Austin resolved that she was entitled to the privilege of facing her father alone. If Caldwell became violent he would take a hand.

"So you're still here?" Caldwell exclaimed as he burst into the house. "You were a damn fool not to go where you sent Grant."

"Why?" the girl asked.

"Because I've put up with you just as long as I'm going to," the man said. "You tried to double-cross me by getting on the good side of those old men—"

"I didn't tell them anything about it," the girl denied. "I only tried to warn them that you had hired men to kill them, but I didn't say anything about the other."

"No. And the reason was that you hadn't found a way to get Grant away. But when you hit on the idea of having him and young Alvord hide out in this cabin you thought you could spring everything on me," the man said violently.

"No, I tell you. That was Grant's idea. I didn't know a thing about it, and I don't know how Austin Alvord

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found out about it. But I am going to tell everything now. I didn't know there was such a person as Austin Alvord until yesterday, but now that I do know about him I'm going to tell the truth and see that he isn't robbed," Edith said defiantly.

"Oh, you are?" Caldwell queried sardonically. "Well, you're a bit late. Every one of those old pelters over in Old Man Valley was killed last night. They inveigled the sheriff into the house and then blew it up, but the big thing is just this—young Alvord was in there too and got himself blowed into a million pieces."

"Why, what are you talking about?" Edith asked wonderingly.

"An' now that he's out of the way there's just two things stand in my way," Caldwell went on grimly. "One of 'em is you and the other is Banty Vogel. And I mean to shut you both up with the same stroke."

"Why—why—what are you going to do?" the girl gasped.

"I'm going to put a bullet in you, my girl, and then frame up evidence that it was Banty Vogel who killed you. He's got a paper I want, and unless he hands it over he'll swing for your murder."

"You—you'd kill me?" the girl asked in a dazed tone.

"Yes, by—"

AN object suddenly hurtled into the room from the bedroom door. Thorn Caldwell's hand was upon his gun, but he stopped, dumfounded at the amazing sight of Banty Vogel entering the room like a whirling dervish. Vogel could not stop until he fell over a chair and sprawled upon the carpet.

Immediately behind Vogel came Austin Alvord. Strangely enough at that critical moment Austin did not think of the gun in the holster at his hip. His one idea was to get his hands on Thorn Caldwell and put him in such condition that he would have to listen to a detailed analysis of his character. Subconsciously, perhaps, he felt a sort of taboo against killing the man because he was Edith's father.

He was half across the room before Caldwell saw him. A corpse coming to life before his eyes could not have caused the rancher more astonishment. He fell back a step, and his face turned pale. Obviously he had thought he was telling the truth about his enemy's demise.

Then he jerked at his gun, but Austin was upon him before he could draw. He let go the weapon and clinched. Each man rose to the pinnacle of physical exertion in the ensuing struggle for supremacy. Indeed, each man would sooner have died then and there than have the other conquer.

Caldwell was forced back against the wall by the fury of Austin's attack, but by a sudden flip and the exertion of all his weight and strength he threw his adversary to the floor. The soft carpet broke the fall, and Austin's catlike speed had made it a rolling fall. Before Caldwell could pin him he had broken loose and got to his feet.

Caldwell bounded to his feet and rushed, but he found Austin meeting him head to head. Up flashed the smaller man's fists in a tornado of uppercuts. Failing to tie him up Caldwell gave ground. Blood was seeping from his mouth and nostrils. He seized a chair and flung it in front of his relentless foe and Austin stumbled. Immediately Caldwell was rushing in again striving desperately to land one of his tremendous swings which he knew was capable of great damage.

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Now Austin was on the defensive until he found another chance to get in close, where he could score heavily with his infighting. His boxing ability enabled him to block most of his foe's blows, or at least partially deflect their force. His arms quickly began to ache from the terrific buffeting he was receiving, and he began to face defeat.

His reaction to that fear was to lunge in suddenly, ducking beneath a swing of Caldwell's as he did so, and seize the man around the legs. With a desperate effort he lifted his big antagonist in the air, but the weight forced him over backward. Caldwell was flung over his head, and by a quick twist Austin managed to get on top. For a moment they wrestled there with Austin trying hard to get a hold on his enemy that would render him helpless. Then by sheer strength Caldwell threw him off.

The living room where they fought was fairly well furnished, but it looked as if a devastating tornado had passed through it before the men had been fighting long. First one and then the other seemed to have victory in his grasp; only to have the tables turned by the strength or agility of the other. In their berserk rage they had forgotten all about the gun each carried, or rather a sort of elemental pride made them determined to win with the weapons nature had given them, or not at all.

WHILE they fought, Banty Vogel circled around them, his keen little eyes as predatory as a hawk's. Always his eyes dwelt hungrily upon the guns in the holsters. Both men wore open holsters to make the draw easy and it was a miracle that in their wild gyrations one of the guns did not fall out. If he could only get one of those guns he could shoot both frenzied men and have things his own way.

Edith had not uttered a sound. She had got into one corner, and only her deep breathing betrayed her intense excitement. In that titanic struggle she would have been brushed aside like an annoying insect by either combatant had she attempted to interfere. The way was open for her to leave the house, but she was not the kind to do that, even though victory for Caldwell meant her own death, and it seemed to her that it was hopeless for Austin to try to beat a man who was so much bigger and stronger.

Then Caldwell landed one of his haymakers on Austin's jaw, and the younger man struck the carpet with a thud. Half dazed as he was Austin saw his foe falling upon him, his hooked fingers ready to fasten upon his throat. Defensively Austin doubled up his legs. Caldwell was already in the air and could not stop. Austin's feet struck the other man's abdomen, and with a powerful effort he straightened out his legs and sent his foe flying halfway across the room.

Caldwell turned a half somersault and landed upon his feet with marvelous dexterity for so big a man, but at last he had shaken his gun out of the holster. Like a weasel pouncing to kill Banty Vogel seized the gun. Caldwell saw him out of the corner of his eye and threw his arm backward to brush him out of the way. Vogel ducked the arm, and with a vicious s n a r l he snapped the gun up on a level with Caldwell's waist and pulled the trigger.

Without waiting for his employer to fall Vogel whirled toward Austin, his evil little face twisted malignantly.

"This time—" he snarled as he jerked the trigger, but the gloating

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sentence was never concluded. A sharp cry from the girl the moment Vogel seized the gun had made Austin look up sharply as he rolled to his knees. He had started to get to his feet, but the roar of the gun had caused him to sink back. Already Vogel was whirling toward him, the smoking gun in a horizontal position. Vogel at last had the handicap he wanted. Down dropped Austin's hand to his gun.

Down! Up! A single swift motion and the gun muzzle nosed eagerly outward as the hammer fell. Banty Vogel fell across the man he had just killed.

AUSTIN got to his feet and staggered toward the two dead men, but the girl was there before him. "Thank God that's the end of them," she said fervently.

"I'm glad it wasn't me who had to kill your father, Edith," he said.

"He wasn't my father, Austin," she said. "That was what I was going to tell you—partly."

"But you called him 'father,'" he protested.

"From habit. He was my stepfather. My mother married him after my own father died, and she died when Grant was born."

"I see. Somehow, I'm mighty glad," Austin said. "This isn't the time nor place to say it, but I don't know what may happen and there's something I want you to know. I've been worried lest I would have to kill this man. I wanted, sometime, to ask you to marry me, Edith, but I felt that I never could do it if I was destined to kill Caldwell here."

"Please don't say that," the girl begged. "I—I—have loved you, too, but you must know what I've been before we talk of that. Then—you'll change your mind."

"I never will. Why the way you've endured this man's abuse to stick by Grant is enough to atone for anything you might have done, but I don't and won't believe you're guilty of anything."

"You think Thornton Caldwell was adopted by your grandfather, don't you?" she inquired.

"Why, of course."

"A Thornton Caldwell was, but it wasn't this man."

"What? How is that possible?" he demanded.

"Your grandfather adopted Thornton out of an orphans' home. He had a brother there, but the brother wasn't so fortunate. Their real names were Thornton and Warren Seegmiller. If there was anything good about Thornton it was that he remembered his brother and tried to do things for him."

"Go on," Austin said pityingly, as he saw that the girl needed a word to encourage her in what was palpably an ordeal.

"Thorn quarreled with his foster father after he was grown, and he hunted up his brother—this man here. They used to talk quite openly. Thorn wanted this Old Man Valley because your grandfather had told him what was there."

"What was there?" Austin broke in.

"You don't know? Well, I heard it when I was a child. Some prospectors sank a shaft in the mountain back of the house there and discovered high grade copper and lead ore. They prospected some more and came to the conclusion that nearly the whole mountain was mineralized. But they found out, too, that the Alvords owned all the mineral rights by the terms of an old grant. They went to your grandfather Caldwell and as he was a rich man he

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gave them twenty thousand dollars for the information, and from that time on he tried every way he could to force the Alvords to sell. But he never would tell them what he knew, and the prospect holes were all filled in."

"I see," Austin said. A lot of things were made clear. Now he knew why the Alvords and the Caldwells had been so bitter about the marriage of his own parents.

"Well, just before your grandfather died Thornton Seegmiller Caldwell took sick and died at the house of his brother Warren—my stepfather here. But the brothers looked so much alike that Warren Seegmiller determined to impersonate him. It was easy because Thorn had been away from the place where Mr. Caldwell was then living, and also from here so long, that few remembered him.

"No other heir appeared, so naturally my stepfather had no trouble getting the estate probated in his favor as Thornton Caldwell. Then he came back here and bought the T Bench ranch from old man Riter, but his big ambition was to get possession of Old Man Valley, and I guess he has spent most of the Caldwell money bribing men like Sheriff Harker to help him."

"And is that all?" Austin asked gently. "Where does your career of crime come in?"

"Why, I—I—knew about it, and I kept still," the girl said guiltily.

"You stayed here knowing that Caldwell might try to kill you! And then you were willing to sacrifice yourself to that murdering little Vogel in order to clear me of murder! And you think yourself a criminal. I wish my record was as good," Austin said.

"But knowing what kind of people I've lived with, and that I've—"

"I know just one thing now, Edith," Austin broke in. "I know a small boy who is badly in need of a real dad. He's already got a mother and a sister in one. I want to be that dad." He reached for her hand, and the one firm little squeeze she gave when he took it told him all he wanted to know.

"Maybe Grant will have something to say about it," she said with a wee smile. Then her face became strained as she looked at the dead men on the floor. "And I want to get away from here," she added.

BACK at the T. H. ranch they were given a clamorous welcome by Grant. The boy had been grossly mistreated, and the look of hero worship in his eyes whenever he looked at Austin was assurance that there would be no trouble from that source.

"You've got to turn in an' git some rest, Austin," Mike Earnshaw declared. "Until you git things settled this ranch is you folks' home. An' don't worry about details. I'll take care of 'em."

Though Austin protested that he could not sleep, the sun was shining the next morning when he woke, and they told him he had slept sixteen hours. Curly Lowe was the man who woke him up then, and he was flourishing a paper.

"Here's that confession that Caldwell signed, an' it'll let yuh out'n any fool murder charges they may lay ag'in' yuh; but down there they're so tickled about gittin' rid o' Sheriff Harker that they'll wanta make yuh sheriff," he said.

"Have any trouble gittin' it?" Austin asked.

"Nate Libby wasn't gonna give it to me when I told him Vogel was dead, but I shoved my gun halfway down his throat an' told him he'd be a heap sight

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deader than Banty if he didn't come across, so he opened his safe an' passed it over. Then when he found out both Banty an' Caldwell had croaked he was durn glad he had," Curly grinned.

Just then Paddy Mallory appeared in the door. The old man appeared as vigorous as ever, but he looked a trifle worried.

"Dunno's I orta mention it now, boy," he said diffidently, "but I'm the only old man from Old Man Valley left. The other three got blowed up with Harker, an' after 'em quittin' us the way they did I guess it served 'em right. But what I wanta know is this: They tell me yo're undisputed owner o' Old Man Valley now. Do ye want me to go back an' milk the cows?"

Austin laughed. "I think you'd better, Paddy," he said. "And as soon as you can find some more down an' out old men to help you, you git 'em. That idea of a perpetual home for old men is a good one. We'll always keep it 'Old Man Valley.'"

Old Paddy hobbled out, too overcome for speech. But Curly said plenty.

"Of all the durn fools," he howled. "Givin' everything up to a set o' withless ole pelters."

Austin finally checked the flow of outraged speech. "If it didn't leave me anything I'd still do it, but I'll have plenty. I'll reserve the mineral rights there, and if they're worth anything, Curly, I'll see that you git in on the ground floor, an' Mike also. But it seems that I can't keep from fallin' heir to the T Bench, so I won't be a pauper anyway."

He had got out of bed and stepped over to the window. Down by the corrals he could see Edith and Grant, and they were petting Vinegar Bally.

"If I didn't have a cent I'd be anything but a pauper, Curly," he said with tears in his eyes.

THE END.

A Historic Bugle

IN the possession of R. B. Cassi of Havana, Cuba, is the bugle with which he sounded the call for the historic charge of the American troops up San Juan Hill. Cassi was a bugler in the Rough Riders, and as his regiment advanced to the attack he was stung by a Spanish bullet. Having no weapon except a revolver, Cassi sought revenge in the only way he knew. Without orders he raised his bugle to his lips. Out rang the charge! Leaping to their feet the Americans swept forward, reached and captured the Spanish trenches, pulled down the yellow and gold banner. Another page was added to American history. After the fight, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt sent for Cassi and after a thorough bawling out gripped his hand. "Had you sent us to defeat, Cassi, I would have court-martialed you," he said, "but as it is, I wish to congratulate you." Later the bugler accompanied Roosevelt on all his election campaigns.

Each year on the anniversary of the San Juan fight Cassi ascends the roof of his house and sounds on the old bugle the call of that fateful day in '98. And from adjacent Cuban homes the lone star flag of the republic flutters down and then ascends in honor of United States.

C. A. Freeman.

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The Men Who Make The Argosy

A. LESLIE

Author of "Train Trap," "Silk Special," "Runaway Dynamite," etc.

THEY say that the winter I was born (1893) was the toughest Virginia ever experienced; but I don't see why they should blame me for that! I started life with a F. F. V. handicap (see Mark Twain), which is something any Virginian will understand. Spent my boyhood days climbing around the cliffs and crawling through the limestone caves for which Virginia and West Virginia are famous. Managed to get through school somehow, despite a speculative gleam in the dean's eyes at times when he spoke of things that would tend to improve the university. Have a diploma in civil engineering and have worked at it some.

Perhaps being born in the mountain country accounts for an uncontrollable desire to see what is over the next hill—and there's always another hill! Anyway, I've spent the best part of my thirty-eight years trying to see. Know something of windjammers, the Horn, China, the South-Pacific, South America and the Arizona-Northern-Mexico region, among other places. Have a tremendous amount of story material dealing with all of them packed away in the back of my head, and hope to see it all on paper some day. Got interested in railroading early in life and have sat in both engine and caboose and have worked in other departments. The World War left me in one piece and a few ticklish situations before and after have done the same, aside from a mark here and there and a few gray hairs.

Have been engineer, musician, fireman, shipping clerk, conductor, gandy dancer, brakeman, cow chambermaid, machinist helper and editor, among other things. At present am editing a weekly publication and writing verse and stories. Book of poems is being prepared for publication at present. Write "highbrow" articles through necessity and for the fun of it, and have sold a large number. Published poems and stories are getting well up into the hundreds now, for which I am duly thankful to kindly editors and tolerant readers.

Prefer to write action fiction, because I like to think that it gives pleasure to people who have cares and sorrows and who may perhaps forget both for a while in the reading of my yarns. That, I maintain, is the greatest height to which a writer can aspire — to make people happy and give them pleasure. Hope to see a lot more of the world, and write about it, before the last installment is finished, and have come to the irrevocable conclusion that the world is a fine place with fine people in it.

My chief inspiration is a tousle-headed, big-eyed, otherwise small bit of femininity with an adorable smile and the disposition of a firecracker. She usually manages to creep into most of my Western yarns, which are generally of the romantic type, and some others, and into much of my verse. She is my best critic and trots along through sunshine and shadow and has never once said, "I told you so!"

I like Chartreuse, football, hunting, Edna Millay, A. Merritt, Lila Lee, Irene Rich, William Farnum, Jeritza and writing. Incidentally, have been an ARGOSY fan for the past twenty-seven years and expect to continue one.

If all this is interesting to any one, I'll be surprised; but the editor asked for it, and here it is.

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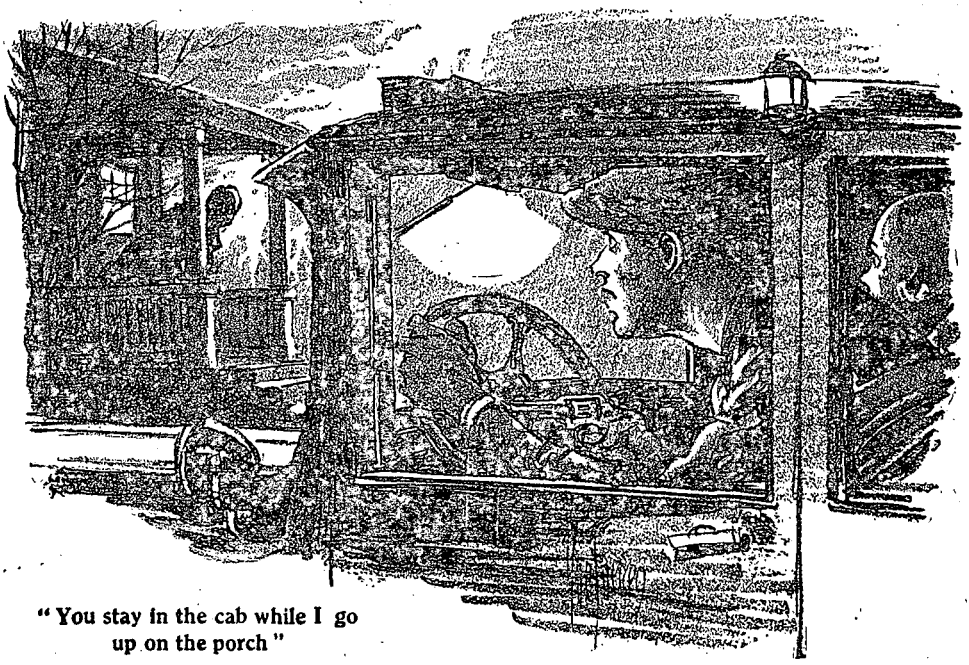

"You stay in the cab while I go up on the porch"

Witches' Brew

It Was a Hideous, Black-Cowled Figure That the Lightning Revealed on the Porch of the House of Murder

By Madeleine Sharps Buchanan

CHAPTER I

The Shot

JIMMIE DORGAN cautiously ascended the six steps, expecting he knew not what. The lightning showed him instantly that he was alone on the porch, across which a soft light shone from behind clouded curtains.

It showed him something else. He sprang back with a muttered oath, bent down and stared in open-mouthed unbelief at the porch floor!

From the storm door to the top step there was marked a huge white cross! That strange sign presaged death, quick and terrible death, and a mystery that makes this serial the season's best thriller. Begin it next week in DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY, formerly FLYNN'S.

Read DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY—10c

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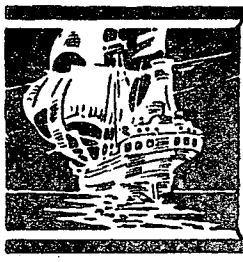

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

RIGHT the first time! There is a *Tama* sequel, or rather a new story about the winged girl from Mercury—coming next month:

Los Angeles, Calif.

"Tama of the Light Country," by Cummings, was his best, so far, and I am eagerly awaiting the sequel, for, of course, there must be one. He couldn't be so cruel as to stop in the middle of his story that way.

MISS ELFIE M. KNOX.

ROUSE'S "Sinister House" and Cunningham's "The Crimson Noose" get a vote for the year's best:

Boston, Mass.

I think that "Sinister House" and "The Crimson Noose" were the two best serials for the first quarter of 1931. "The Hothouse World" was good, but ended too abruptly, in my opinion.

The new Grinstead serial is good so far and "The Battle of the Silent Men" promises a much better story than Mr. Nicholson's last offer.

When will you give us another by W. C. Tuttle? I'm not much of a Western story fan, but I do like Tuttle, Cunningham and Grinstead.

When will the fans get another by Eustace Adams? Old "Coon Mountain Bill" has made a great hit with me with his stories of Bildad Road, etc..

The novelettes have been taking first place on my coupons quite frequently of late; we've had an unusual run of novelettes since January 11 and nearly all of them were fine.

S. C. AIKIN.

ANOTHER of the cheers for J. E. Grinstead's "The Crimson Trail":

Asheville, N. C.

I am with C. C. Anthony one hundred per cent when he classes "The Crimson Trail" as one of 1930's best stories. I rarely ever read Westerns, but here is one so vastly different that for the first time since I started reading ARGOSY I was not bored—by Westerns I mean, for your other stories are splendid. Who but ARGOSY could claim such a staff of writers as Roscoe, McGrew, Gardner, Perkins, Cummings, J. H. Thompson, Brent, Kline and MacIsaac?

ARTHUR G. JARNETT.

"THE Bell of the Lutine," Jack Allman's undersea novelette, gets much praise—and so, we predict, will his serial next month—"Under the Polar Ice":

New York City.

I think that the ARGOSY is one of the best magazines published. Our family can hardly wait until Wednesday to get the magazine. I like the *Jimmie Cordie, Peter the Brazen, John Solomon, Mme. Storey, Gillian Hazeltine* and *Semi-Dual* stories about the best.

"The Bell of the Lutine" was certainly a wonderful undersea story.

DOROTHY J. COLLIER.

Schenectady, N. Y.

My favorite authors are George F. Worts, author of that thrilling murder story, "The Diamond Bullet;" Fred MacIsaac, whose best story is "Balata," and Jack Allman, who wrote a great novelette in "The Bell of the Lutine." I almost forgot to mention Erle Stanley Gardner, whose "Whispering Tales" are most interesting reading.

WILLIAM O. MEYER.

A COLORADO reader praises our variety:

Denver, Col.

The fine words that are printed above the title of your magazine on the front cover are really all that is necessary to explain its contents, but allow me to add my impressions with those of other readers.

"Variety is the spice of Life," is a well known adage, and when it applies to the literature that we may come in contact with, it has a value that can be appreciated. If one is not suffering from a certain monomania for a specific type of fiction, ARGOSY should meet with one hundred per cent approval.

In the issue I have just finished reading I find each story on a different subject. Of the four serials, there was one on international affairs that involves spies; one was a Western; another was

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of the French Foreign Legion and the jungle; the last was a story of the future. Among the four complete stories were the following types: sport, army, business, and one of the Far North. Add to these the few "fill-in" features and you have three or four hours of really interesting reading.

V. L. ST. JOHN.

JIMMIE CORDIE is fine, but not *John Norcross,* says a Louisianian:

Lake Charles, La.

As to my preference of stories they are all good as a rule. The stories of the future and of interplanetary travel are the ones I like best of all.

The *Bill* and *Jim* stories are another of my favorites. The stories about *Jimmie Cordie* and his pals are fine, but cannot say the same for "Guns of the American" by the same author. However, have been reading your magazine rather steadily since 1917 which was about the time I learned to read. The ARGOSY was really the first magazine I read and I can remember the plot of a Western story I read at the tender age of ten years.

Hoping you will keep your magazine the same as it is at present,

A. R. MILLER.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

Name.....

Street.....

City.....*State*.....

Fill out coupons from 10 consecutive issues and get an ARGOSY drawing (not the cover painting) for framing.

This coupon not good after August 22.

5-30

Looking Ahead!

The Devil's Checkerboard

Rodney's Bend, on the border between Texas and the outlaw fastnesses of the old Indian Territory, was a board on which men were the pawns of Fate—until Joe Dent came riding on a horse thief's trail.

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

Out of the Silence

A novelette of a hunted, framed heir to millions, who never guessed his strange, fantastic power of reading men's thoughts until—

By GARRET SMITH

COMING TO YOU IN THE ARGOSY OF JUNE 6th

9 A

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Classified Advertising

The Purpose of this Department is to put the reader in touch immediately with the newest needfuls for the HOME, OFFICE, FARM, or PERSON; to offer, or seek, an unusual BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY, or to suggest a service that may be performed satisfactorily through correspondence. It will pay a housewife or business man equally well to read these advertisements carefully.

July 11th Classified Forms Close June 6th.

AGENTS AND SALESMEN WANTED

UNUSUAL OPPORTUNITY — $100 WEEKLY SELLING BETTER QUALITY, ALL-WOOL, union-made-to-measure suits and topcoats at $23.50 and $31.50. Build big repeat business. Liberal bonus for producers. Large swatch samples FREE. W. Z. GIBSON, INC., 500 Throop, Dept. E-409, Chicago.

MICHIGAN FARM LANDS FOR SALE

MONEY MADE IN MICHIGAN POTATOES. $10 DOWN NOW AND EASY TERMS BUYS LAND NEAR MARKETS, LAKES, STREAMS. WRITE TODAY. MICH. ACREAGE CO., M-601, 32 NO. STATE ST. BLDG., CHICAGO.

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SWEAR OFF TOBACCO. NO MATTER HOW LONG YOU HAVE BEEN A VICTIM, NO MATTER HOW STRONG YOUR CRAVING, NO MATTER IN WHAT FORM YOU USE TOBACCO, THERE IS HELP FOR YOU. Just send postcard or letter for our Free Book. It explains everything. NEWELL PHARMACAL CO., Dept. 845, Clayton Station, St. Louis, Mo.

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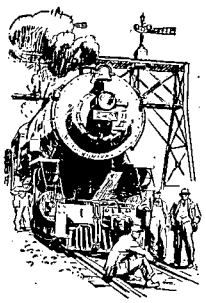

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RAILROAD MAN'S MAGAZINE

Fact and Fiction

For Details Read the June Issue

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Write for our New Diamond Ring of Romance and Bulova Wrist Watch Catalog, showing marvelous new designs. Never have we been able to offer such beautiful diamond rings and artistic dependable watches at such low prices. The catalog is sent FREE.

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DANGEROUS DIMMING ENDED..

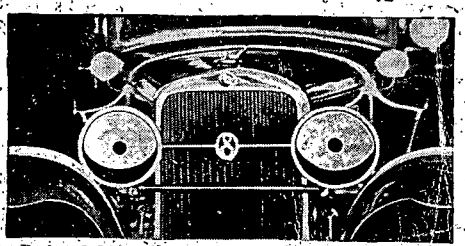
Road Light Doubled!

Crowds swarm about new invention at Auto Shows and learn how science has at last banished motordom's worst and greatest problem. Read details below.

AMAZING INVENTION FITS ANY HEADLIGHT...

Revolutionizes Night Driving!

At last! Night driving suddenly becomes actually SAFER than day! At one sweep, a tiny, inexpensive invention banishes glare yet doubles road illumination! Cuts through every light on the road! Fits any car. Use coupon QUICK for liberal FREE TEST OFFER!



Perfect-O-Lite even looks absolutely unique and entirely different. Every sale brings dozens more. It's the greatest "self-advertiser" ever known.

IT is a well-known fact that motor-car manufacturers have solved every big problem except one. As soon as the sun goes down at night, the highways of America break forth into a constant, rushing stream of "dimming and damning." Speed is cut down one-third to one-half. Every Monday morning finds the highways littered with broken glass, wrecks, cars in the ditch, overturned, shattered against telephone posts. Every man who ever groped dizzily down the highway in traffic at night knows the horrible sensation of being half-blinded by cars on his left, unable to see the ditch on his right, his own lights seeming dim and shadowy and practically worthless. Now, in a twinkling, this curse of night driving is lifted completely and *inexpensively* from the shoulders of the entire motoring world!

FITS ANY HEADLIGHT

This new lighting discovery is called Perfect-O-Lite. It is a little invention that replaces the "bulbs" in your automobile headlights. No extra wiring or installation. Yet actually DOES double road illumination. Banishes need for Glare Shields. Cuts through the other fellow's light, yet absolutely cannot glare in his eyes. Makes ruts, animals, children, detour signs, etc., visible at least three times as far. Makes night driving at 40 to 50 miles an hour safe and easy.

The secret of this new light is in the kind of "beam" or "ray" that it throws. Instead of ordinary light, this new invention pours a solid beam of double-reflected or "infused" light down the entire roadway. Shows up ditches at the side, as well as distant objects, absolutely clear, without the usual flickering "shadows." Space here limits further discussion of the facts.

MAKE YOUR OWN TEST FREE

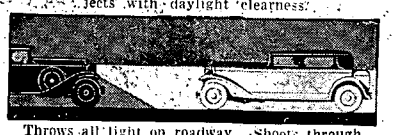
Under an introductory offer you are now invited to be the judge and jury without risking one penny. The coupon brings full details of the invention, offer of a set on FREE TEST and facts about agent's money-making opportunities. Mail the coupon, without obligation, TODAY!

AGENTS! Buettner Made $2,400 In 3 Weeks

This new invention unquestionably opens up one of the most amazing money-making opportunities ever presented. Here actually IS that chance for $8 to $14 in your FIRST hour, $6,000 to $10,000 THIS year, with no limit WHATEVER for Distributors! Fleet owners buy quantities. H. J. Heinz (57 Varieties) trucks just equipped. Other big orders flooding in. A real self-advertiser; each car equipped is seen by thousands. Buettner, N. Y., actually reports profit of over $2,400 in just 3 weeks. Start full-time or spare-time. Use coupon for FREE TEST OFFER and details of Exclusive Territory, etc.

HACHMEISTER-LIND CO.
Established 1903
Dept. E-150 Pittsburgh, Pa.

Lights entire roadway, including ditch. Absolutely no glare to on-coming car. Unique double-reflected, "infused" light beam cuts through every light on the road. No flickering "shadows." Even lights distant objects with daylight clearness.



Throws all light on roadway. Shoots through fog, mist, rain and snow like magic!

Hachmeister-Lind Co., Dept. E-150, PITTSBURGH, PA.

Rush details and your Free Test Offer also send facts about agent's money-making opportunities, without obligation.

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